

Reunion

by TheBabeLebowski

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Summary: COMPLETE! Five years after the battle with Red Death, peace has finally reached Berk. But when that peace is interrupted after a freak storm, Stoick orders change that threatens the relationships Hiccup holds dear; and things get worse when they realize the Outcasts and the Berserkers are no where to be found. WARNING: Mature language, graphic violence, and sexual content.

1. Trust Fall

_This is the first chapter of many I have already written. I am not putting them all out at once until later, so I hope you will enjoy this as it comes along. Follow for more chapters that are sure to come!

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* * *

><p>Reunion, **written by Phay G.
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Chapter One: Trust Fall

"Astrid!"

Her name seemed to make no sound as the wind pelted Hiccup's face relentlessly, Toothless flying beneath him faster than usual. He readjusted his new foot and Toothless' tail, turning them into the island away from the coast. The sun was setting and frost slowly crawled from the mountains to the lower lands of Berk.

Since finding Toothless, his Night Fury and the only dragon of his kind on Berk, Hiccup changed greatly. He became a dragon rider, promoting a change in Berk's way of life. People no longer killed dragons, a common pest for the Viking tribe of the island, but rode them instead, befriending them and caring for them. Hiccup always

traveled the skies around the island, but usually it was with Astrid and her Nadder, Stormfly. Neither could be found.

He tried calling Astrid again. Of course, it didn't work, and Toothless was much better at making a sound heard over the pounding of the wind above. He roared and grunted and cooed in hopes of finding his master's friend. They kept flying, Hiccup worried. The only time he had seen her get so angry was when he beat her in the dragon fighting days a year ago, but today, she didn't even talk to him. She disappeared.

Toothless was thirsty and the closest freshwater was in a familiar place for the pair. The cove. The cove was where Hiccup had found Toothless and rehabilitated him to health, and where Astrid first met the Night Fury back when she would have tried to kill him. They found the break in the ground, the gleam of the fresh, blue lake, and glided into it gently. Toothless landed and Hiccup unclipped his metal leg from his dragon, dismounted, and let Toothless drink. They would resume searching afterwards.

Hiccup turned around and slowly walked around the cove. On his new leg, it seemed awkward. Not feeling his other foot beneath him was like flying a dragon for the first time. He gazed around the rocky walls and his eyes caught glimpse of something blue.

Stormfly peeked from behind a large boulder, croaking and hooting like a huge bird. Before Hiccup chose to run to her, Stormfly ran to him instead. The sounds she made were worrisome and Toothless perked up as the Nadder jumped behind Hiccup. She nudged him violently forward.

"Ow! Stormfly, what's going on? Where's Astrid?"

He heard her before he saw her.

"Stay away, Hiccup!" she yelled threateningly from behind the boulder. Hiccup glared. Stormfly whined and pushed him towards it.

"Stormfly won't let me."

Astrid growled. "I will cave your face in if you step around that boulder."

Hiccup frowned. With Stormfly behind him acting the way she was, and Toothless corresponding with her in a way that made Hiccup worried, he approached the boulder slowly. It sounded like Astrid tried to get up, but she cried out and there was a thump. Stormfly stiffened and growled deep in her throat, shifting side to side and shaking her head about. Hiccup ran around the boulder and found Astrid on her hands and knees shaking.

"Astrid?" Worry became alarm as he leaned next to her. She put up a hand to wave him away. It was smeared with blood. Hiccup fell back onto his backside when he saw the red on her pale skin, and she looked up. Her skin was paler than usual, her skin beading with sweat and wet with tears. "What happened?"

Her jaw quivered as her anger morphed into hatred. "They were going to marry me off."

Hiccup blinked. "What?"

"After the fight with Red Death," Astrid explained angrily through gritted teeth, "my parents told me they had a marriage contract ready. They were going to make me do it."

Astrid's face said the rest. She hated the idea of being married off. She was a strong, young woman who had no qualms about cleaving your head in two with her battleaxe. Marriage was not something Astrid wanted for herself, and with things between her and Hiccup on-and-off and yet entirely innocent, she hated the thought of marrying someone she didn't know.

"To whom?" Hiccup wasn't sure if he wanted to hear the answer.

"I don't know. I don't care."

"Why are you bleeding?" Hiccup asked. He crawled over to her and rested a hand on her back, hoping the closeness would reveal an injury she was trying to hide. What he caught a glimpse of were her thighs free from her trousers, and smeared with the same blood on her hand.

He jumped to his feet and scrambled backwards, his stomach flipping. He tried to say something, but no words came out.

"I can't get married to someone I don't know!" Astrid protested. "And the only way that can happen is if the elder sees I've been touched."

Hiccup pulled on his hair and felt his knees go weak. He wanted to hurl, but managed to breathe, "We need to get you home."

Astrid spit through her teeth both in pain and anger. "No one can know, Hiccup. I don't want them to find out I did this."

"So you'd rather everyone thought you snuck about?" Hiccup murmured. He liked Astrid, almost admitted to loving her, so the thought of having the village believe she was one who fooled around made him sick. The degree of what had happened, of what Astrid implied she did to herself, made his mind run faster than he could comprehend. "We need to get you help. We need to get you back to the village."

Next thing he knew, Astrid was grabbing onto the straps of his riding vest and sneering in his face. "You can't tell anyone what I did! You need to promise me that augh!"

Astrid bit her tongue and groaned. Hiccup, breathing fast and hard, held onto her. "Fine, okay, I won't tell anyone. Just come home."

"I don't want to get married," she whimpered. "Please. Don't let me marry someone I don't know, someone older than me. I'd rather die."

Hiccup swallowed and looked to Stormfly, who was agitated and worried to see her owner injured. "I promise you, Astrid. We'll come up with a story."

Hiccup kept that secret for five years. After telling the elder Gothi

about how Astrid got attacked by a foreign fisherman, Gothi had looked between the two of them after healing Astrid to the best of her ability, pursed her lips, and gave a small nod. He knew she didn't buy the tale, and Astrid's marriage contract to the unknown suitor hadn't been dissolved, but merely postponed until she grew older and decided she was ready as the other party of the marriage contract didn't want to fully annul the agreement.

A year after that, Astrid's parents had another child. Her younger sister was named Snowdrop, an odd name, but that was to be expected. To have a pretty name or a name that made any sort of sense stood out like a sore thumb, like Astrid. But two years after Snowdrop's birth, Astrid's dad perished in a horrible poisoning accident, and her mum was captured in an Outcast raid. They were two of many Vikings and dragons who lost their lives, but theirs were the most memorable and mourned. Snowdrop's care went to Astrid solely, and thus, Astrid became a parent. But she still had time to fly.

"Okay, bud," Hiccup called over the wind that pelted his face as the sun rose in the horizon. The new saddle he made to replace his smaller one when he was younger was holding strong. He had to forge a new leg with Gobber's help to account for his recent growth spurt shortly after his twenty-first name day, and that too was working better than he had thought. Good thing, too. Something was chasing them.

Hiccup cranked his foot down to fold Toothless' tail. They dove downwards towards the angry sea. The rider was still lanky enough to rest his body over Toothless to remain streamlined when fast flying was most required, and they shot through the air faster than an arrow down, down, down closer to the waves. He pulled up to fan out Toothless' wings to shoot over the water. Looking behind him, he expected to see his attacker long lost in the darkness, Toothless being in his element of night.

But Astrid was on his tail, Stormfly's jaws open and her body swooping on top of the Night Fury dangerously close. Hiccup twisted out of the way and the chase grew even more hostile. Stormfly spat flames towards Toothless' tail, trying to light the prosthetic alight. The flames brushed it but the tail held firm as Hiccup flew over the cliffs.

"Now!" he demanded. Ruffnut and Tuffnut, on their Zippelback Barf and Belch, shot out from a hole in the cliff-face, their dragon's necks wrapped in tough leather armour. They rose up under Stormfly and wedged her body between their heads. They crossed to trap Astrid. But she told Stormfly to spike up. Hundreds of deadly spikes shot out from Stormfly's tail, and an eruption of flame lit up the dark blue sky. Snotlout and his Monstrous Nightmare, Hookfang, lit the released spikes on fire to protect Hiccup further.

Astrid and Stormfly fought Barf and Belch off of them. Ruffnut, wielding a spear and a mischievous grin, leapt off Barf's head and onto Stormfly, trying to overpower Astrid. That was next to impossible. She was too good of a fighter, even in breakneck speed, and she met Ruffnut's advances with her bare hands and her feet, eventually kicking Ruffnut in the gut and sending her into thin air. Tuffnut and the dragon released Stormfly to catch her while Fishlegs and Meatlug, his beloved Gronckel, puttered above firing lava shots. Astrid counted those six shots, grunting and ducking and feeling the

heat on her back.

"Great manoeuvering, guys!" Hiccup called proudly as Astrid leveled out. "The new tail is working!"

Astrid's face was covered in sweat, her long blonde hair sticking to her forehead and flicking in the wind. The gang pulled up on their dragons to ascend higher in the clouds. It was cooler up there. But as they rose, Astrid felt Stormfly beneath her. Her Nadder seized up, one of her wings folding in awkwardly and suddenly. They lurched to the side. Flung from her dragon, Astrid expected to fly through the air, but her arm was caught in the strap of her saddle. Her arm screamed in pain and she gasped. Stormfly couldn't unfurl her wing and they began to fall.

"HICCUP!" she screamed. She clawed at Stormfly's saddle, trying to free her arm. Stormfly howled as they spiralled towards the stormy morning sea.

The entire party spun around to see Astrid in a deathspin.

"Stormfly's wing!"

"No! Astrid!"

"Again!"

Hiccup pushed Toothless down and tried to catch up. But the Nadder was spinning too wildly to get as close as he needed to.

"We need to get that wing open!" Hiccup told Toothless. Toothless grunted beneath him and lunged forward, using his jaws to snap at Stormfly's contorted wing. He wrapped his gums around the arm of the wing and wrenched it open, steadyng Stormfly so suddenly that it caused Astrid's arm to pull free. They didn't realize she was still falling until she smacked the water of the frigid sea. Toothless dove away from Stormfly, who was still struggling but was keeping her wing open, and Hiccup looked into the waves wildly.

"Astrid! ASTRID!" he yelled into the waves. It was the peak of winter and the water was cold enough to kill. A hand exploded up from under the horrendous waves that sloshed Astrid's strong body back and forth. She gasped in the frigid air and almost couldn't breathe again. She flailed around before Hiccup hauled her in front of him.

"Stormfly," she shivered, shaken from the impact to the water and the frozen embrace she clawed out of.

"We got her. Gods, this is bad, we need to get you to a fire."

"Is she okay?" Fishlegs called from above. Hiccup waved to them and motioned to Stormfly.

"Get her back to the Academy, get Gobber to check that wing again. I'm taking Astrid home." He leaned forward to talk to Astrid. "Lie on top of Toothless, he'll keep you from freezing."

She huddled forward and Toothless perked up his crown of dragon fins

to give her more protection from the wind. Hiccup leaned over Astrid to cover her more and the three of them raced back to the town on the island of Berk.

Toothless landed limberly in front of the Hofferson home, left entirely to Astrid and her younger sister since their parents were taken from them. Hiccup slid off Toothless first and Astrid slumped into his arms. Her clothing was too wet and heavy and her body too cold for her to properly walk herself. That didn't mean she didn't try.

"I'm fine," she growled, pushing from Hiccup.

"Yeah, uh huh."

He watched her try to open her door. From the back, her shoulders hunched and her hair dripping onto her furs, Hiccup almost wanted to laugh. It was as if she knew, because she turned around, eyes full of anger.

"I can't open the door without waking up Snowdrop."

Hiccup crossed his arms and cocked his head to the side while Toothless chirped behind him. There was a tense silence. He took the opportunity to stare at Astrid with a mischievous grin. Her cheeks were fiery red and her bright blue eyes glared into Hiccup's with annoyance. "So I guess I'll see you tomorrow?" he challenged.

Astrid narrowed her eyes into slits. Hiccup laughed gently as he stepped around her, pulled on the lock latch, shoved open the door, and gestured Astrid inside. She stumbled inside, but not before punching Hiccup in the gut. He groaned as she sat in front the embers of the fire, tossing a log into the pit. She untied her furs and tried to pull them off, hanging them on a rack. Hiccup grabbed a wool blanket and tossed it over her shoulders. She then tried to undo her braid. She lifted her arm and gasped.

"What's wrong?" Hiccup asked quickly, crouching next to her. She tried to roll her shoulders and she grimaced.

"My arm got caught in Stormfly's saddle," she grunted. Hiccup pushed the blanket aside and fingered her pauldron, the armour covering her shoulder. Astrid looked away as Hiccup pulled the armour off.

"May I?" he asked politely, motioning to her shoulder strap. Astrid murmured assent and Hiccup pulled the strap down her shoulder. It was bright pink and red. She looked over and Hiccup moved her arm gently. It hurt, but she was more or less alright. "You won't have to go to Gothi."

"Thank the gods," Astrid groaned. Hiccup straighten up and looked to Toothless who lay next to the door licking his arm. Toothless looked up at Hiccup, his huge green eyes happy and wide. Hiccup smiled and motioned him over. Astrid shot a look at Hiccup. "Wait, maybe I do want to see Gothi."

"No, you don't," Hiccup laughed. "Toothless, here." He held out his hand. Astrid rolled her eyes and shivered as Toothless stuck out his huge tongue and licked Hiccup's palm. Even Hiccup winced as the spit dribbled down his wrist. "Okay, that's still disgusting."

He smeared it over Astrid's shoulder. She growled. "That hurts!" she hissed. Hiccup shook his head as her face calmed. Night Fury saliva was a common healing agent; Hiccup discovered its sedating properties after Toothless first licked his face and his skin went partially numb. Now, it soothed Astrid's pulled shoulder as Hiccup rubbed it in. It wasn't intimate, just close, and Hiccup felt something flutter in his stomach. But he asked Astrid to replace his hand to rub the spit in.

Astrid was still shivering even though the fire grew hotter. Her hair was dripping down her back.

"Here."

Hiccup grabbed her hair and untied the leather strap to unbraided her golden locks. She soon stopped shivering as he silently worked his calloused fingers from root to tip. He used another blanket to rub it dry, or at least to get the extra water out. Astrid leaned back against him and Hiccup caught his breath. They rarely had these comforting quiet moments, on and off since the battle of the Red Death. But when they happened, they both smiled internally in each other's company. Marriage laws in Berk made it more difficult for them to do anything more (if they wanted to).

"I hope Stormfly's okay," Astrid mused. "I know her wing has always bothered her, but it would only get sore!"

Hiccup nodded against her ear, sighing heavily. He wrapped his arms around her to warm her up even more as he thought. "She was a fighting dragon before she became yours. I mean, you were the one who broke a shield across her head."

"Don't remind me," Astrid shuddered. "But I never hurt her wing."

"But someone else did. So we take it easy. We've been trying out new things with her. Training has gotten harder on everyone, I'm not surprised that it hurt this morning."

Astrid twisted her mouth and huffed. "What if that happened when I was alone?"

There was a tense silence as the couple thought of it. Hiccup blocked the image of Stormfly and Astrid drowning, or worse, one of them drowning and the survivor living without the other.

"That's not going to happen, Astrid."

She nodded against the side of his face and relaxed a little. Hiccup tightened his arms around her and closed his eyes. He was so relieved he was there; Astrid was the type to try to save herself. Usually she was more than capable, but alone over the ocean with a downed dragon struggling in the freezing waves far away from any sort of shore!

"Toothless seems to like his new tail," Astrid mused.

Hiccup shook off his worry and looked over. "Yeah! the fireproofing worked, so that's a step. And the new leg is, too."

His new foot gleamed in the firelight as he looked down at it. It had to be completely redone to make up for his final growth spurt, making it twice as long as his very first leg. And this one secured to his leg firmly. He felt it controlled Toothless' tail a lot easier, and that was the main point.

"I wanna see!" a shrill voice laughed from the bottom of the stairs. Hiccup and Astrid both jumped. Astrid cursed under her breath as her shoulder throbbed from moving. Snowdrop, Astrid's younger sister, stood at the bottom of the stairs in her furs. Her blonde hair was tangled hilariously over her blue eyes and she was missing another tooth. She bounced up and down and scurried over to the pair. Hiccup made it to his feet from behind Astrid and caught her. She squealed as he spun her around, roaring like a dragon.

"Look out, it's a Ferocious Snowdrop!" Hiccup gasped. He brought her down and tickled her before she laughed too hard to breathe. "Good morning!"

"I wanna see your new leg, Hup!"

Snowdrop was only three and smart for her age, but she couldn't pronounce Hiccup's name quite yet. But Hiccup showed her and she laughed when she poked it.

"You ready?" she asked excitedly to both Astrid and Hiccup. "I wanna go!"

"That's why I'm here! I'm going to take you to the Academy myself," Hiccup smiled. "Astrid will catch up with us later."

"Can I ride Toofless?!" she gasped. She held onto Hiccup's neck and she squeezed him with all her might. "Please, Hup! Pleeeeease?"

Hiccup looked over her shoulder to Astrid, who looked back at him. The corner of her mouth curled up and she rolled her eyes. "Only if you tie your hair."

It wasn't Astrid who did that for her, but Hiccup, who even with his architectural hands, couldn't brush hair worth spit. But eventually, Snowdrop was bundled up in her furs safe and tight and clambered onto Toothless. Hiccup secured himself behind her and he nodded at Astrid, who was standing and slowly rolling her shoulder back and forth. She would be fine in a couple of hours.

Toothless walked gently out of the Hofferson house and the door shut behind them. Then Hiccup leaned over Snowdrop, who wrapped her tiny hands around the saddle, and Toothless charged up the square before rising into the sky. Their next stop: the Academy.

2. His Answer

Chapter Two: His Answer

The list of things Hiccup couldn't do versus the things he could were certainly unbalanced. It seemed like whenever he found something he was good at, three things he was horrible at popped up out of

nowhere.

The new Dragonling Class was underway, which meant all of Berk's young folk gathered in the Academy arena to learn everything about dragons. Hiccup was certainly the most knowledgeable about training dragons. The only thing: Hiccup wasn't a very good babysitter. About a dozen children ran about the arena and Hiccup, Snotlout, and the twins raced about trying to keep them from getting hurt.

"Dragonbreath!" Snotlout yelled at a young boy hanging off Hookfang's horns. "Don't touch that!"

Ruffnut and Tuffnut raced after Barf and Belch, who were under the command of two young girls. "Don't spark, don't spark!" Ruffnut yelled. Of course, the twins weren't entirely adept at training their dragon, so Barf and Belch did the opposite. They set the twins on fire, and they ran about blaming each other and dove into a trough nearby.

Hiccup meanwhile was laying on the ground under a heard of hungry Terrible Terrors, who nipped at his leather flying suit trying to find fish. Most of the kids crowded around him squealing in laughter as he picked himself up and opened a barrel of fish for the Terrors to terrorize. He brushed himself off and ran after the Hideous Zippleback to retrieve the two girls from their necks.

He calmed the dragon and pulled the girls off, sending them to the other children.

Finally, Hiccup managed to gather the last child, ushered them to the group, and put his hands on his hips.

"Dragons," he scolded, "are dangerous if you don't know what you're doing. We're putting the big boys away now."

The children all moaned in disappointment as the dragons sat at the side.

"Now, we will get to those dragons when you are older," Hiccup sighed, "but we are starting with the dragon book."

"But dragons!" Snowdrop pouted. Some other kids agreed. Hiccup put up his hands.

"If you guys promise to remember everything in this book, then we will get you your very own dragons."

That seemed to make the kids happy, even a little.

"Now," he began with the twins limping behind him and Snotlout not paying attention, "who can tell me what a Monstrous Nightmare is?"

* * *

><p>The class continued for a time before Astrid caught up with him. Fishlegs was still with Stormfly and Gobber, and they didn't have anything to say to her. They chose to keep Stormfly for the morning and when Astrid finally made it to the arena, the children were at it again.</p>

"Don't touch him there, he won't like that!"

"Don't feed him that!"

"Get it off me!"

"Don't step in that!"

"What did I just say?!"

"Thor, grant me the strength to not kill a child today."

Astrid entered the arena and ducked under flying helmets and dodged squealing children. Then she remembered that dodging children isn't usually a common thing, and she realized they were holding onto Barf and Belch's tail, whirling about laughing and having fun. Hiccup was tied up in the corner and Ruffnut and Tuffnut were lying in opposite corners of the arena. Snotlout was hanging off the chain roof of the arena, calling for help.

"ENOUGH!" Astrid yelled. Everyone froze and the children immediately released the dragon and got into a group. She pointed at Hiccup. "All of you. Go untie Hiccup and get the twins before I make Stormfly eat you."

The children scurried away and Astrid tried her very hardest not to laugh as they shoved Hiccup onto his face to get to the knots they tied. She was proud; she taught them how to do that. And the fact they used it on Hiccup was perfect. Hiccup was freed soon enough and the twins were pulled to their feet. Snotlout meanwhile dropped from the roof onto Hookfang's back.

"Now that's settled," Astrid huffed, "let's get some steam out of our systems in a better way."

The kids loved Astrid. She kicked ass, encouraged them to do the same, and they looked up to her as a dragon rider and teacher. "Berk has been at peace for four years. Since Alvin the Treacherous poisoned our river and raided the village, we ran him out and haven't heard of him since. But that doesn't mean he's not going to try to attack once more; he wants our dragons, and our trainers. We have to make sure he never does that."

The kids nodded. Hiccup was behind all of them, smiling at Astrid, knowing her parents were victims to those separate events, and her strength was admirable. "So if anyone attacks, we fight back. Snotlout and Tuff, go for it. Show the Dragonlings what to do."

When they were younger, in the days of dragon fighting and not riding, Astrid was the only one who seemed to know how to work a shield properly. Since then, since the last Outcast attack, everyone improved with their dragons. It was how Snotlout met his wife and how Ruffnut saved her brother from capture. They had their favourite weapons, their favourite styles, and their own determination. Looking back, they all improved.

Snotlout and Tuffnut readied themselves and looked to Astrid for instruction. "Okay kids, choose their weapons."

Within a few minutes after a bout of laughter, Snotlout ended up with a spoon and Tuffnut had a pair of undies. They looked at the kids absolutely unamused.

So they began to spar. Snotlout threw himself at Tuffnut and knocked him to the ground, but Tuffnut rolled away to avoid getting crushed (Snotlout was still quite broad in the shoulders and Tuffnut hadn't filled out his own) and Tuffnut kicked him away. He threw the undies at Snotlout's face, who flailed around and distracted, Tuffnut shoved him over.

But Snotlout rolled back and the kids cheered as he leapt onto Tuffnut, brandishing his mighty spoon and almost gauging it into the twin's eyeball.

"Well done!" Astrid said. The men untangled themselves and shook hands before Snotlout punched Tuffnut across the face. All for good Viking sport. The kids giggled and Ruffnut held her brother back from fighting again. "Always use what you have around you. Never think it couldn't be a weapon. Give me something."

They gave her a hatchet. Hiccup gave out an annoyed sound. If there was anything Astrid didn't need any improvement on, it was using an axe. And she was staring right at him, hatchet in hand, her eyes narrowed. "Hiccup?"

The dragon rider looked at the kids, who all gawked at him. The famous Hiccup Haddock Horrendous III facing off the famous Astrid Hofferson without their dragons. Even the other adults looked at each other in amusement. They all knew how the couple acted around each other. In her younger days, Astrid had no problem with punching Hiccup and kissing him full on the mouth immediately afterwards. They thought Astrid was doing this to get closer to him. Hiccup knew this was payback for making fun of her for not being able to open her door. He wasn't looking forward to it.

Hiccup looked to the kids and waited for them to give him a weapon. Ruffnut was next to him, grabbing a handful of ball-rope. The kids murmured to each other, their eyes sparkling with mischief. They all pointed to Hiccup's foot.

"A weapon," Hiccup repeated. "I need my foot."

"Astrid said you could use anything as a weapon," Snotlout's son, Swimplout, challenged. Astrid nodded and grinned at Hiccup. Ruffnut readied herself from faraway and began to swing the iron balls around her head.

"Go!"

Astrid swung the hatchet by Hiccup's head, barely grazing his partially braided hair. He wrenched himself out of the way and stumbled back. Ruffnut flung her ball-rope towards Astrid, who arched her back to avoid getting hit. She spun around, crouched low to the stone, and knocked Hiccup's metal leg out from under him.

"Always go for their weakest point!" she instructed as she brought the axe down beside Hiccup's head. He kicked her out of the way, a lot harder than he initially intended, and grabbed his foot. He unbuckled the securing strap and hauled it from his leg, raising it

just in time to block Astrid's weapon. They clang together and Hiccup twisted the metal leg to pull the hatchet from Astrid's grip. She held firm and they rolled over and over.

Ruffnut threw another set of ball-rope. It cracked Hiccup on the side of the head and he saw stars for a moment before Astrid rolled him over, twisted his arm back, and raised her hatchet. The fight was won.

The kids bounced up and down in anxious excitement as Astrid let Hiccup go and laughed breathlessly. Hiccup held the side of his head and groaned. He pulled his hand back and found blood on his fingers. Only Astrid saw the tinge of red, the grimace of pain, before Hiccup looked up, smiled, and shook her hand with his other. He looked over to Ruffnut and scoffed. "You were supposed to hit her!"

"I did hit her!" Ruffnut protested.

"No, you hit me!"

"Oh, whoops. You two look alike."

Everyone stared at her for a moment. Tuffnut was the only one who agreed with her, surprisingly enough.

The kids giggled and Astrid looked away. Hiccup had a small trickle of blood drip in front of his ear. He brushed it away, smearing it back into his hair line. Astrid frowned as he refastened his foot back to his leg. She pulled him aside.

"Hiccup?"

Hiccup raised his eyebrows, as if he didn't know he was hurt. He smiled. "Got me again."

"You're bleeding."

"I'm a Viking, aren't I? I'm bound to bleed once in a while."

Astrid pulled him back and frowned at him. "Your head is bleeding."

Hiccup pulled away and looked to the kids. "Hide and seek! You have three minutes to hide anywhere in the arena."

The kids all scampered off. Ruffnut and Tuffnut and Snotlout pretended to count, really talking to each other about food and women. Hiccup looked down at Astrid, lips pursed.

"You're not going to let this go."

Astrid raised her hand to check it herself. He grabbed her wrist. She flipped her hand around, grabbed his own wrist, twisted his arm back, and spun his body around.

"Ow! Owowowow! Astrid!" he gasped as she pushed his arm up. She used her other hand to touch his hair. It was wet. Probably looked worse than it actually was, but she couldn't help but worry. Hiccup, with surprising strength, bowed suddenly and made Astrid fly over his body onto her back. She lost her breath but rolled over and growled.

The others looked at them with amused grins. They threw punches at each other.

Tuffnut leaned over to Snotlout and laughed. "When's the wedding, you think?" he asked jokingly.

"As if," Ruffnut snorted. "Remember all those years ago, when that fisherman attacked her in the woods? No marriage for her."

"You don't actually believe that, do you?" Tuffnut griped.

Ruffnut nodded and glared. "I do, actually. What's the big deal?"

Tuffnut hit a nerve and he knew it. "Never mind."

"What, so you mean that she was invincible? That it was impossible for it to happen to her?"

"I said never mind, Ruff," Tuffnut growled. "I didn't mean to bring it up."

That didn't stop Ruffnut from picking up a staff and jabbing it into his stomach with all her might. "If it can happen to me, it can happen to her, so shut up."

Tuffnut leapt to his feet and the siblings fought beside Astrid and Hiccup. Snotlout looked to the sky and furrowed his eyebrows. But no one else noticed.

"Guys," he called, not taking his eyes off the sky. "Guys!" he repeated with more demand in his voice. Astrid slammed Hiccup down on the ground and pinned his shoulders back. Ruffnut had Tuffnut in a headlock and she was banging a club into his helmet over and over. "GUYS!" Snotlout screamed.

Lightning crashed across the sky, the clouds dark and sinister. Loud growling echoed from above. Astrid looked up and jumped off Hiccup. "Stormâ€|" she whispered. "Storm!"

Ruffnut and Tuffnut stopped fighting. "I'll get the kids!" they said at the same time.

Hiccup made it to his feet quickly. "That's not a stormâ€| That's a Skrillâ€|"

Everyone took a moment to look at him in horror. A Skrill. That meant deadly trouble. One of the few dragons Hiccup hadn't gotten close enough to train, and that was because it set its skin alight with fatal lightning bolts. And the past few times a possible thunderstorm was on Berk's doorstep, a Skrill would push it to a catastrophe.

Just as he thought that, another bolt of lightning struck into the village. Smoke billowed up and the town bell began to ring.

"Do a head count, get the kids back to the Great Hall!" he yelled. "Astrid, we need to get to the village. If that Skrill lights any of the houses on fire, someone needs to put them out."

"But Snowdrop â€“ "

"We'll deal with her," Snotlout said, pulling kids close to him.
"Go."

Toothless bounded up to Hiccup, eyes in scared slits. He jumped onto his back and pulled Astrid behind him. She held onto him as Hiccup went racing out of the arena and into the sky.

When they made it to Berk, just over the fields, a large house was on fire. Astrid tightened her grip on Hiccup; it was her house. Toothless flew down and grabbed a wheelbarrow full of water, and threw it into the smouldering house. The flames almost went out.

Houses getting destroyed was not uncommon in Berk, but that didn't make the realization that her house was on fire any easier for Astrid. So far, it was just the roof.

Rain poured from the sky as if Thor poured a godly bucket down, getting everyone soaked within a few seconds. The wind knocked people off their feet and Toothless had to steady himself.

Hiccup's father was in the main square with his Thunderdrum Thornado whimpering, looking up at the sky. Toothless touched down in front of Stoick the Vast and Hiccup called over the wind.

"There's a Skrill on his way!" he yelled. "We need to get everyone into the Great Hall!"

"Working on it!" Stoick yelled. Already, many villagers were running up the many steps to the Great Hall, and in the distance, Hiccup could see Barf and Belch, and Hookfang carrying the children inside. He calmed a little knowing they were okay.

"Stormfly!" Astrid yelled. She leapt off Toothless and landed on the ground, running for the forge where Gobber was.

"Astrid!" Hiccup. He pulled Toothless around and they began to run after her, the wind too strong to fly. "It's too dangerous!"

And as he said it, the Skrill flew from the clouds and swooped over his head, screaming a terrifying scream that made Stoick duck under Thornado's wing. Astrid kept running and Stormfly ran from around the house. The Skrill saw the wounded Nadder and screamed again, more lightning shooting down. A bolt landed on the forge, and Astrid flew back.

"Astrid!" Hiccup yelled.

He caught up to her fallen body; the Skrill disappeared into the clouds. She was already back on her feet, her face bleeding and her body shaken. Stormfly let her climb up and the two of them ran their dragons for the Great Hall. They were the last ones to finally enter before Stoick and Gobber shoved the doors shut. Stormfly croaked and cooed and Astrid jumped down. Hiccup was beside her and he grabbed onto her.

Her face had been cut, a small cut to the forehead and the neck, and they bled a lot more than he thought they would. He pressed a hand to

her neck and she held a hand to her head as the two of them made their way to the back of the hall, where Gothi and the children were supposed to be. The village made way for the pair of them.

Snotlout was counting the kids again as Gothi waddled up to Astrid. She knelt in front of the healer and she pressed a bandage to her neck to stop the bleeding. She would be fine, she knew that, but Astrid wasn't worried about that. She looked at all the children and Hiccup did the same. But Hiccup did not notice what Astrid did.

"Snowdrop," she said harshly, looking at Snotlout. "Where is Snowdrop?"

"I had her with me at the arena," Snotlout began to say. Astrid tore away from Gothi and violently put her hands on Snotlout's collar.

"Where is my sister_?!" she shrieked. Hiccup grabbed her and ripped her away from Snotlout. Ruffnut and Tuffnut met with them.

"I can't find her, either," Tuffnut said.

Astrid put her hand to her neck again, grimacing. "She's still hiding. Hide and seek, oh for the love of Odin, I need to get her!"

Stoick had overheard her and rested a hand on her back. "The doors are shut. No one goes out in this weather. Not with a Skrill on the loose. You know the rules."

"But it's my sister!" Astrid screamed. "She's going to die unless I get to her!"

"Dad, Snowdrop is all alone in a metal-encased arena. And in this rain, she'll freeze," Hiccup desperately tried to explain.

"I know, son," Stoick said painfully, yet officially. "But I can't send anyone out. Not now. I can't risk the lives of anyone else."

"I will go, I will get her!" Astrid tried to say.

"You will do no such thing!" Stoick ordered. "You are hurt, and to go out there is suicide. The answer is no."

"That may be your answer," Hiccup said, "but it's not mine."

He turned and ran through the crowd back to the doors before Stoick could grab him. He wrenched open the door and ran out, Toothless hot on his heels.

The first thing he felt was the freezing rain. It had gotten even colder, each drop like a small arrow of ice. Toothless groaned and winced against the cold. The sea in the distance crashed against the cliffs and pillars like fists of water. The roar of the Skrill sounded again.

"Let's go, bud!" Hiccup yelled, jumping onto the Night Fury and the pair lurching forward. Toothless' job was to find the right position in the wind to fly properly while Hiccup met that demand with

steering his tail. Toothless opened his wings and scooped them upwards into the wind. Hiccup resisted the urge to choke in the cold as Toothless wildly flew for the arena, the dragon intelligent to know something was still there.

The chains of the arena attracted the Skrill with a delicious curiosity. It hovered over the arena. It swooped down and threatened to make its lightning dance along the metal before Hiccup cried out. "Now!"

Toothless fired his plasma shot at the Skrill, hitting it in the face and deflecting his shot. The Skrill couldn't see through the rain and thank the gods Toothless was tiny enough to slip into the arena without the huge dragon seeing. Hiccup landed, his thin body thrashed around by the roaring wind and knocking him to a knee. He glared through the water that dripped into his eyes and Toothless growled at the sky.

"Snowdrop!" Hiccup yelled. He could barely see two feet in front of him. Toothless fanned out a wing to shield his rider from the bitter iciness raining from above. The stone ground beneath them vibrated when Toothless rumbled angrily at the sky. They only had a moment to find Snowdrop.

Hiccup raised his arms over his eyes. He struggled to the other end of the arena, his boot sloshing and his metal leg slipping around. He made it to the other side and was relieved beyond reason to hear Snowdrop wailing behind the weapons cart. He shoved it aside and found her cold and wet, clutching onto a Terrible Terror, who was equally as scared.

He made a move to grab onto her, but the metal chains snapped off the roof and flew into nothingness. The Skrill landed on the wall and roared into the arena. Snowdrop shrieked and Toothless flailed back, wings unfurled and teeth gleaming with every flash of lightning. A claw came down and swiped at Hiccup, who used his body to shield Snowdrop as much as he could. He felt the leather of his suit slice open like butter but felt no pain, thank the gods. Toothless fired at the Skrill again and again, the two dragons facing off with lightning as much as they could.

Hiccup scooped Astrid's sister up and held her close. She was still screaming. He didn't know if she had been hurt, but so long as she made sound, it meant she was alive. But she wouldn't last long in this cold. Neither would Hiccup. Snowdrop clutched onto his soaked leather riding suit. He pried her from him and planted her in Toothless' saddle.

"Go, Toothless!" Hiccup cried. "Get her out of here!"

Toothless looked at him and shook his head. He wouldn't leave Hiccup. The Skrill roared again and Hiccup's hair stood on end. Time slowed down and lightning danced across the sky, arced down onto the Skrill's trembling body, and flickered along the metal frame of the arena. Light blinded Hiccup and a surge of pain and power shot up from his leg into his heart. He almost fainted, but Toothless was next to him. He fell against him and found the will to climb up and into the saddle behind Snowdrop. Toothless bounded out of the arena and flew with the wind away from the Skrill, who flew back into the sky.

His heart hurt. His body tingled and he couldn't feel his leg. He could barely work the tail and they almost crashed into the Great Hall. Toothless opened the door with his teeth and slipped inside to the people of Berk.

Hiccup slid off Toothless first among the yelling townsfolk, trying to grit his teeth. He weakly pulled Snowdrop down and limped through them. Many people gave him a wide berth, eyes wide. He saw Astrid at the end of the hall elbowing through her fellow Vikings.

"Snowdrop!" she sobbed. Snowdrop pulled from Hiccup and ran into Astrid's arms. Hiccup never saw Astrid cry so hard as when that tiny body smashed into her, shivering and blubbering. She looked her up and down and pulled off her furs to wrap around her sibling, picking her up and cradling her. The crowd cheered and praised Hiccup for his bravery.

Stoick had his fist on his hips. He gave him a terse nod as if to say he wasn't happy, but he was proud all at once. Hiccup smiled and found a pillar to lean on, his head throbbing too hard to focus anymore. Gothi took Snowdrop from her with the help of her matrons while Astrid ran over to Hiccup and grabbed him, sobbing against his chilled skin.

"Thank you, thank you so much," she cried. She pulled back and kissed Hiccup on the mouth.

In any other circumstance, Hiccup would have reacted, even kissed her back. Instead he fell against her, groaning and eyes rolling back. He couldn't breathe and he pressed a hand to his side. Toothless roared.

"Hiccup!" Astrid gasped. She helped him to the floor and lifted his chin to see his face losing colour morbidly fast. "No, no no no, look at me!"

He tried to smile, to let her know he was fine. Toothless was behind Hiccup and pulled his body against him. Astrid immediately saw the blood on his flying suit along with a horrific gash that wrapped around his ribs down to his stomach. She frantically unbuckled and untied the suit, wrenching it free. Stoick shoved through the crowd and Gobber yelled for the healers. Astrid pulled the leather away and blood spurted forth onto her furs. She cried out and slammed her hands to it, desperate to stanch the flow. Toothless whined.

And along his chest, webbing up like tiny lightning bolts were furious red markings. An elder gasped into her hand. "He has been blessed by Thor."

Hiccup grimaced in pain and began to shiver. He pressed his hand over Astrid's and looked up at her. "Is Snowdrop okay?" he asked feebly. Astrid didn't seem to want to talk about it, tears rolling down her cheeks. "Astrid? Is she okay?"

"She's fine," Astrid choked. "Keep your eyes on me."

"That's n-not v-very hard t-to do," he breathed. He coughed and Astrid pressed harder against his ribs. He choked and Toothless seemed to coo and chirp beneath him. Everything went quiet to Hiccup

and he kept his hand on Astrid's while the healers brought a red hot iron over. Hiccup took one look at the tool and praised the gods that he fainted before he found out what they'd use it for.

3. Rough Hands and Gentle Touch

TheBabeLebowski: Thank you to those who have read, favoured, and followed this story, as well as those who took the time to review. It means a lot to me. :)_

* * *

><p>Chapter Three: Rough Hands and Gentle Touch

Astrid wasn't one who was especially wealthy. She had few items to trade here and there, but beyond that, she didn't have much to offer. So when Gothi took her and Snowdrop in after the Skrill set their house on fire, she went to work to help. It didn't mean she was very good at it. She was good at chopping wood, riding Stormfly with tact and precision, and brutalizing Vikings who wronged her. When she was fourteen, she took out her anger on trees by smashing a hand-axe into it repeatedly; now, six winters later, she could do far worse with a sharpened weapon.

But when it came to working for Gothi, she had to pull on a more comforting stature. Beating things to death had to be replaced by tenderness and comforting words. She began to get the knack of it when her father died. With her mother, she had to hunt not only for herself, but for a child. And when her mother was captured and killed, it left Astrid with Snowdrop and a huge pile of learning things over. She was growing used to being a motherly figure to Snowdrop. Being caring and tender and gentle for someone else was a different type of dragon all together.

Astrid crept into the chief's house as quietly as she could. She closed the door behind her and looked to the fire where Stoick and Gobber sat, discussing politics. They looked up at Astrid with thankful expressions and waved her over. She approached carefully and let Stoick envelope her hands with his. She looked around awkwardly, not entirely sure if she was allowed to look right at him.

"Thank you for all your help," he said gruffly. "I trust your sister is fairing a bit better?"

Astrid nodded and smiled tiredly. "She is. She's staying with Gothi until she can shake the cold, but she is getting stronger every day."

Stoick nodded and motioned to the staircase. She took her leave and let the men resume their conversation. She climbed the steps and entered Hiccup's room. He lay in his bed while Toothless sat across from him on his dragon pad. He looked up, dragon fins back and eyes in slits, teeth bared. Astrid put up a hand and he immediately calmed. His eyes went wide and his fins perked up.

It was warm in Hiccup's loft. Toothless hadn't gone outside unless he needed to relieve himself so the mixture of a hot fire and Toothless' body heat made it almost overwhelmingly stifling. Astrid unclipped

her fur hood and her cloak (it had snowed lightly that morning) and draped them over the chair by his bedside. Soon, she was in her riding gear. It was a simple leather suit that mimicked Hiccup's with some Astrid adjustments worked into it. While Hiccup loved having red marking on his clothing, she opted for blue. And she kept her pauldrons. Her father made them. She turned out to be quite sentimental about many things after her parents left; she didn't dare admit that to anyone else and no one brought it up with her.

Free from her winter clothing, she stared at Hiccup and bit her lip. She wasn't entirely sure where to start. He was pale and sweating, his hair stuck to his forehead and his breaths calm and deep. Gothi's matrons gave her a bag to take with her when she came, and it was full of poultices in vials, dressings, and a needle with sinew. She hoped that wouldn't be needed when she remembered it was in her bag. But she also told them she didn't have to be the one to assist with Hiccup. The matrons merely chuckled with one another, gave her a grin, and shoved her out the door. They certainly weren't modest.

"We saw you kissing him in the Great Hall!" one had laughed.

"Because he saved my sister. I would have kissed anyone who did that," Astrid had growled.

The matron in question snorted and rolled her eyes and readjusted Astrid's furs around her chest before she was sent out. Astrid made sure to mess them up afterwards; she wasn't for the primping and preening her Nadder was used to. This was a serious job, not one for flirting and courtship. Besides, what was the point? Astrid was promised to someone else until she was ready. As if.

She hovered her hands over Hiccup's sleeping body and hesitated. This felt weird. Invasive. She almost wanted to punch herself into sensibility. She pulled the blankets from Hiccup and felt even more awkward and warm when she found him not wearing as much on his body as she was used to. His riding suit, slashed apart by the Skrill, was gone and being repaired by Gobber. Bandages wrapped around his torso over and over, showing off his chest and shoulders.

She felt her chest throb painfully and she gritted her teeth. Along his bare chest were the sharp thin lines of lightning scars. She knew what she had to do: replace his bandages, do the routine the matrons instructed her to do, and leave him be.

The only thing was she wasn't sure how to move him. She reluctantly reached for his shoulders and rested a hand on his neck. She wriggled her other hand beneath his shoulders. She cringed. He was sweating like a Terror facing a Changewing. She was close to his face and she tried to keep her head far away enough to keep the strands of her loose braid from falling into his slightly open mouth.

Toothless made it to his legs and scampered over as Astrid tried to pull Hiccup up. He nudged his owner's head until it was over him and he lifted his master up gently. Now that Hiccup was sitting up more or less against his dragon, Astrid could replace his bandages. She sawed through them with a small knife after looking to Toothless to reassure him that she wasn't going to stab him. The bandages wrapped around his chest and she pulled them free. Toothless wrinkled his

nose at the sight and Astrid sighed with distortion, like a breath taken after seeing something you didn't particularly want to see.

The cut was healing nicely, but it didn't look pretty. It started in the middle of his back and wrapped around his ribs to end around the front. The gash had been burned shut and pressed with a poultice of some kind, which Astrid also replaced. She didn't like pulling everything from the cut; it showed her how injured he was. She wasn't sure how Hiccup let himself get hurt like that. He never turned his back on dragons, never.

The skin around the cut was red and she dabbed at it with a cold cloth. She looked up at Toothless, held out a hand, and the dragon licked her palm grossly. She ran her hand over the cut and the redness went down under the sheen of Night Fury spit. She rewrapped his torso and chest and Toothless eased him back down. She washed her hands and looked to the Night Fury, who sniffed his owner's face and cooed as he wandered back to his dragon pad.

Astrid sat in her chair next to Hiccup and looked at him with worry. Her job was done but she didn't want to leave just yet. Hiccup's scars, the gash and the lightning marks, were all from him saving Snowdrop. She wasn't sure howâ€| Hiccup wouldn't have let this happen to himself easily.

"You have to wake up sooner or later," she huffed. She only hoped that was true. Every day, she would wake up and be terrified to hear that he passed and would be cast into the ocean. Thankfully, no Viking funerals had been planned for brave Hiccup.

Astrid brushed his hair back with one of her calloused hands and she cupped his cheek.

"Hiccup," she began quietly. She ran her down to one of his hands. She held it gently as if to comfort herself more than him. She took a moment to feel comfortable before opening her mouth to speak, closing it, and opening it once more.

"Snowdrop is okay," she forced. "Sick, but that's normal for a child out in the freezing rain, right? Gothi says she'll be fine. And we're getting a new roof on our house, which is good. I mean, good because I don't have one anymore. The dragons have been taking turns using their wings to keep it from flooding. It's amazingâ€|

"Stormfly is okay, too. Gobber found a salve to ease her wing cramps. I can fly her around the island and it seems to be working butâ€| I'm not pushing her right now. And you should see the others. Snotlout had to send for his wife at the Academy yesterday because the kids somehow tied Tuffnut to the new ceiling. I think Ruffnut and Fishlegs helped a bit, but I was impressed. One of the kids told me to tell you to wake up before he asks Thor to do it for you, too."

She laughed lightly but it didn't improve her mood much. She wanted him to wake up. She stared at his face again and had a private realization. She stood up and looked to the stairs again before looking back to Hiccup. She ran her fingers into his hair gently, using her fingers to work along his scalp when she found the small bump Ruffnut had cracked when she tossed the ball-rope.

Crouching next to him, Astrid parted his hair to see the cut. It was small and healed over. She covered it with her palm, and used her other to move Hiccup's head slightly. She leaned over him, close to his face, and listened to him breathe for a minute. It was a lovely sound, the sound of someone living and recovering. The sound of silence was the most horrible sound when it came to injuries. Astrid used to sit next to Snowdrop's cot to listen to her breathe and murmur in her sleep to remind herself she still had her.

Hiccup's soft breath brushed along her face and she breathed him in, just to feel his life against her to reassure her for a single moment, keeping her hopeful that he would wake up.

* * *

><p>Gothi nodded to Astrid when she came back. She set her bag down and put her furs away before she went to Snowdrop, who was sitting up in bed being fed her soup. She squeaked at the sight of her sister, then coughed loudly. The matron left with the soup while Snowdrop reached forward for a hug.</p>

"Hello, my tiny dragon," Astrid said happily. "How are you?"

"Good!" she wheezed. "I almost finished my soup!"

Astrid smiled widely and poked Snowdrop's nose. "That's how you're going to be strong and train your very own dragon!"

Juniper, a younger matron, approached Astrid and checked in with her for a moment about Hiccup. Snowdrop gasped and tried to jump up. Astrid had to grab onto her before she fell out of the bed. "Hup!" she cried. "Hup!"

"Hush, hush," Astrid said. "Hiccup is alright. He's sleeping."

"He got an owie!" Snowdrop said sadly. "I saw it."

Astrid frowned and looked up at Juniper, who listened intently. Lifting her sister up, Astrid sat on the bed with her back against the wall and Snowdrop cradled in her arms. "How, Snowdrop? Can you tell me how he got hurt? So we can make him better?"

With this new task, Snowdrop nodded and thought for a moment, obviously scared of the Skrill that had attacked them. "I was cold. Like, really cold. It was wet and I was playing hide and seek and then I was all alone. And then this big dragon came up and lit the sky on fire!"

Astrid flinched slightly but kept her arms around Snowdrop's tiny body. "And then?"

"I was hiding behind the cart with all the swords and Hup pushed it over. Then the Skrill ripped away the roof, the one we usually make Snotlout hang off of when we're bored."

Her older sister nodded and hid the fact that her heart was racing. "That dragon roared really loud and Hup likeâ€| made a little fort over meâ€| like this."

Snowdrop clambered up and reached over Astrid head, putting her

petite hands against the stone wall and straddling her as best as her short legs would allow.

"See? Like a little fort."

Astrid reminded herself to breathe. Hiccup turned his back to the Skrill to shield Snowdrop. He had used his entire body to protect her.

"Then he put me on Toofless, and there was a bright light and he began to shake around. His body was covered in light like the dragon and he fell against Toofless and we left. Then I came back and I missed you so much, Astrid, did you miss me?"

Snowdrop grabbed Astrid's face and squished her cheeks. Tears threatened to roll down her cheeks and she held onto Snowdrop, burying her face into her tiny shoulder. When she pulled away, she looked to Juniper, who had a hand poised over her mouth in shock.

"I have to tell Stoick," Astrid said shakily. "I thinkâ€| I need a walk."

Juniper nodded and took Snowdrop, who was growing sleepy. Astrid made her way from the bed, grabbed her furs, and rushed outside, tears threatening to freeze onto her face in the frigid air.

* * *

><p>She knew Stoick was scouting the island with Snotlout and the twins, and Astrid didn't bother looking for him. She went straight back to Hiccup's house, ran through the door, panting from the hills and steps to get to the chief's house. She ran up the stairs and threw her furs off.</p>

She then realized that she had no idea what to do or say or think. She stared at Hiccup, who hadn't moved, and grabbed his hand.

"Why in Thor's name would you do that?!" she cried. "You could have died, you could have been mangled, why would you do that to me?! But Snowdropâ€| I want to be mad at you and I can't because you saved one of the only things I have left on this stupid island! But you were another one of those things, you foolish, crazy _boy_! I could have lost both of you and now you won't wake up!"

Astrid grabbed onto his face and turned him to face her. "You need to wake up, Hiccup! Please!"

She got quieter as it became harder to breathe. She brought her face down and kissed his forehead. "You need to wake up."

She kissed his nose and his cheeks. "Wake up before I snap you in half, pleaseâ€|"

She kissed his mouth and let her shoulders bob from sobbing quietly. She prayed from him to make a sound, to kiss her back, to shove her off him, to be offended by her words. Nothing. She kissed him again and again as if each little peck would wake him up.

"Pleaseâ€|" Astrid begged.

And a hand ran up her side weakly.

4. Contracts

_Thank you to those of you who have recently followed, favoured or reviewed this story! I save each and every notification and I am truly honoured. Being new, I also updated my profile if the previous lack of it bugged anybody. _

* * *

><p>Chapter Four: Contracts

Astrid felt a hand run up her side gently, a murmur escaping Hiccup's lips as she kissed them tearfully. She didn't expect him to actually wake up, and she pulled away to look at his face. His eyelashes fluttered and he groaned quietly. His hand ran up her leg and over her backside, up her back to the back of her neck. Astrid couldn't move.

"Hiccup?" she breathed. The hand on the back of her neck twitched. She tore away from him, leaping back and feeling very invasive. She wrung her hands as Hiccup's nose wrinkled as his hand flopped back to his bed. Toothless was up in an instant, nuzzling his owner. Hiccup opened his eyes slowly and winced. He breathed deeply and sporadically. He pressed his hand to his side and Astrid remembered the situation. She returned to him and rested her hand on his side. Toothless croaked and tried his hardest to stay off the bed.

"Don't move too muchâ€| you're still hurt."

Hiccup looked at her tiredly and squinted. "â€|Astrid?"

She twisted her face comically. "Yeah, the pretty one who lives down the path, remember me?"

Hiccup looked terribly confused and he stared at the ceiling. Then he began to breathe quickly, eyes going wide. Astrid placed her other hand on his chest. He grabbed her hand and held it.

"Did I lose the other one?" he asked hoarsely. "Gods, tell me I didn't."

Astrid smiled. "You're only missing the one leg, don't worry."

Hiccup sighed and licked his lips. It was hard for him to swallow so Astrid fetched him a mug of water. Toothless wriggled under Hiccup's head and propped him upright again. Astrid handed him the mug and helped him drink. She set the mug down and brushed her hair behind her ears, making sure her face was dry. Hiccup let his eyes shut once more before he let himself remember what happened.

"Snowdrop?" he said quietly.

"She's fine," Astrid replied, keeping her composure (barely).

Hiccup smiled weakly. "I was worriedâ€|"

"No need to be, she's alright and so are you."

Hiccup nodded in agreement and scratched Toothless' head as much as he could. Astrid watched his every movement and wasn't sure if she should have left or not. But Hiccup's hand was still over Astrid's and he didn't move it. She wasn't about to draw attention to it. But Hiccup pulled at his blankets. Astrid stopped him from tugging at his bandages.

"Don't, I just replaced those," she said quickly.

Hiccup furrowed his eyebrows. "I don't understandâ€| what happened?"

Astrid bit her lip and looked away. "I'm not sureâ€| but Snowdrop says you covered her and the Skrill's claw snagged you. Sliced through your riding suit like water."

He blinked and looked off. "I didn't even feel it. I mean, I knew it tore open my suit, but it was so fast. I didn't even feelâ€|"

He squeezed Astrid's hand as he remembered more. "I was bleeding. A lot."

"When I took off your suit, it opened up," Astrid said, shuddering down her entire spine. "But it's been burned shut and you should be okay."

"What about you?" he asked quietly. "Are you okay?"

Astrid blinked and looked around, confused. "I'm not the one who got fileted by a lightning lizard."

Hiccup picked up his hand and ran his thumb over her forehead gently. "You hurt your head. And your neck." He brought his fingers down to pull her collar away to see her bandages. Astrid grabbed his hand again and pulled it away.

"I'm fine. Really."

Hiccup relaxed a little. "That's really good. I'm glad."

Astrid nodded. There was an awkward silence as Toothless let his master lie back down. He curled up next to the bed as Hiccup pursed his lips.

"I can feel where that wound is," he said. "I probably won't be able to ride for a time."

"Good idea."

Hiccup turned to her and stared at her. She looked away and wasn't sure what he was looking at her for. He glared at her for a second before squeezing her hand. "I didn't mean to scare you, you know."

Astrid breathed deeply. "I know."

"I wasn't going to leave her out there."

"I know."

"I wasn't going to come back without her."

"I know."

Hiccup reached over and pulled her to him for a hug. She rested his cheek against his chest and trembled. "I'm really glad you did, though."

Hiccup chuckled. "Me too."

He tilted her face so she was hovering over him. He smiled and cupped the back of her neck. He ran a thumb over her cheek and grinned as best he could with all the pain and stress his body was revealing to him. They touched foreheads and breathed for a moment, simultaneously. Hiccup gave her neck a little pull and their lips gently touched.

Astrid felt Hiccup kiss her this time, and she kissed him with as much tenderness and fragility as he gave her. It was as if he could shatter beneath her, and when she thought he would pull back and keep it at that innocent level they had kept it at for six years, he held onto her and kissed her again. He didn't kiss her hard, quite the contrary. But he kissed her and for once tasted her lips and let her taste his. It was new ground, new feelings, and Astrid let her eyes close and the two of them held each other. Astrid kept her body off his, but let herself give in to his gentleness, his tired care, before she pulled away gently and they looked into each other's eyes.

"This is where you rip me in half for being too bold," he said jokingly.

"Gimme a minute, I'm deciding on your fate as we speak."

Hiccup smiled again. "I thought I'd give it a try. It's nice."

Astrid smiled with a tinge of pain; it was nice. But nothing could come from it.

* * *

><p>Word spread around Berk that Hiccup was awake. Stoick and Gobber held a meeting at the Great Hall to announce his favouring health and Stoick returned to the house. He clambered up the staircase and found Hiccup in the loft lying in bed looking out the dragon-door in the roof at the setting sun.</p>

Stoick wanted to cross that room and crush his son in an embrace. Instead, he put his fists on his hips.

"My son," Stoick gruffed. "You disobeyed me."

Hiccup looked up and twisted his mouth. But for once, he did not look away from his father's intense stare.

"You could have been killed!" Stoick gushed angrily.

"Snowdrop had a higher chance of dying from the cold, or worse," Hiccup retorted timidly.

"But as your father and your chief, I told you not to go!"

"I know you would have rather kept me safe, dad," Hiccup began, "but if I was her age stuck out in the cold, you would have wasted no time getting to me. You would have killed anything and anyone to save me. I was only following an example."

Stoick pursed his lips under his magnificent beard. He sat down loudly and glared at his son, who stared back, trying to not overstep the glaring to a point where Stoick would toss him out the dragon-door.

He huffed loudly, sighing his massive shoulders in a way Hiccup was unused to. "If it were youâ€œ I would have fought for you just the same. But I almost lost you. Again. Without your mother, and without anyone else who shares my blood left on this island, I can't help but be overbearingly protective of you, you sodding fool."

Hiccup nodded and looked into the distance. There was a moment of silence before Stoick leaned forward.

"You do me proud, son. It would help if stopped risking your own skin to do that."

Hiccup turned back and grinned lopsidedly. "And how else would I get you to notice me?"

He didn't expect him to say anything to that. His grin slowly faded when he noticed Stoick staring at him with an answer on the tip of his tongue. It made Hiccup sit up a little straighter, suddenly apprehensive.

"â€œ I meant that to be rhetorical."

"It's not going to be," Stoick replied bluntly. "I almost lost you. I watched you bleed all over the Great Hall with that gods-forsaken grin plastered on your face as if you weren't dying. Berk has been at peace for four years since the last raid, but that doesn't mean that we are completely safe. Alvin may send more Outcasts, or another dragon that even you don't understand may kill someone."

"That's not going to happen."

Stoick growled. "Do not pretend to know the future, Hiccup. If we lost you, I would have nothing. Nothing."

His voice cracked and Hiccup's heart throbbed. A lump grew in his throat as his father brushed it off as if it never happened.

"You have always known that when I go to Valhalla, the leadership of Berk rests on you."

He didn't want to hear this. He grew anxious and uncomfortable and he wanted to squirm as his side began to throb from searing pain.

"And then to your children will you pass to them."

"Dad â€""

Stoick raised a hand. "You are twenty-one winters old, Hiccup. It's time to consider the inevitable. Your bravery, your courageâ€| you need to get yourself ready to lead. Before she passed, your mother made a scroll with the name of your betrothed for you to open when you were ready."

Hiccup frowned and looked away. "That's justâ€| great."

Stoick gave a hmph. "Did you suspect otherwise?"

He gave a small shrug. "I never really thought of marriage. I guess I never thought you'd arrange something."

"You're the chief's son. Of course you'd be promised to someone. Right when your future wife was bornâ€""

"Don't." Hiccup was surprised by how sharp that sounded. "Don't call her my future wife."

"Shall I call her by her first name?" Stoick asked angrily. "I thought you'd be happy to hear that you'd marry."

Hiccup spat. "I don't want anyone, dad."

"Just because you don't want someone now doesn't mean you won't later," Stoick replied harshly. "This marriage can unite two clans to make us stronger. More economical."

"I'm not a commodity!" his son yelled with some volume he forgot he had. "Why is this so important to you?!"

Stoick blinked and leaned back. "Becauseâ€| I almost lost you and Iâ€| I want to see you move on with your life before something happens to me."

The two men stayed silent. Hiccup banged his head on the headboard in frustration. He dug the balls of his palms into his eyes and sighed heavily. "Who?"

"You're the one who has to open that scroll."

"Just tell me."

"She's from another clan."

Hiccup's hands flew from his eyes and he stared, absolutely shocked.
"What_?! You're serious?"

"Do I look like I'm joking?" Stoick said, deadpan. Hiccup clamped his mouth shut and dug his nails into his palms. "You will reveal the name of your bride the day you can walk on your own. Cheer up and be merry!"

Stoick put on a sad attempt at a smile and Hiccup looked away. "You have a bad habit of not listening to what I want."

His father extended his arms in mock defeat. "No use in leaving it be

for any longer. You want me to notice you without you putting your neck on the block? Do your mother a favour and open that scroll when you're better. I'd rather a wedding than sewing you back together after another bout of heroics."

He descended the staircase and Hiccup banged his head on the headboard again. He wanted nothing more than to fly out of that house and around the island until his cheeks went numb from the cold. But Stoick returned with a small chest in his hands. He set it on the chair next to Hiccup, opened it, and revealed the scroll with a ribbon tied around it, fastened by a Terror tooth. Hiccup didn't move.

"Open it on your own time, I will send word to all the clans to come. This will be a wonderous occasion, Hiccup. Your mother's only firm wish was to choose for you and even I don't know the answer. You'll do me proud."

He left shortly after and Hiccup stared at the scroll as if it were the Skrill all over. He barely remembered his mother, and now he wanted to take one of the only gifts she had given him in his hands and hurl it into the ocean with an unknown rage that made his chest flutter painfully.

5. Bloody Lips and Bloody Knuckles

_Thank you to the new followers and reviewers. I am readying for midterms and three plays on my end, so I am sorry if the flow of chapters is not as fast as you would like! I am trying my hardest. Anyhoo! _

* * *

><p>Chapter Five: Bloody Lips and Bloody Knuckles

"This isn't good," Fishlegs groaned in the Academy. He put away the weapons from the Dragonlings and looked back to Tuffnut. He and Ruffnut glanced at each other with frowns on their faces. "You're sure?"

"Stoick is sending us out to tell the eastern clans," Ruffnut said with a tinge of disappointment. "This is really happening."

News that Hiccup was betrothed stayed among the messengers being sent out to the other tribes to spread word of the wedding. That meant everyone but Astrid since Stormfly was still recovering, and no one thought it was wise to tell her the one man she was comfortable kissing in public was to marry a woman from another clan. And no one knew who it was. It made it worse.

Fishlegs was to go north, Snotlout south, the twins east, and Stoick forbade western travel towards Outcast Island. Snotlout had already left and told the twins, who told Fishlegs. They prepared to travel from the island, but they weren't happy.

"At least he's okay, hey?" Tuffnut said, falsely chipper.

"Apparently he hasn't eaten in days. The moment he can walk, Stoick's going to announce it to the whole village. I'm not surprised he's trying to not get better."

Fishlegs sighed and scratched Meatlug under her chin. "Let's go, then, girl. Before we run into Astrid."

"And why would that be an issue?" a voice said behind him.

All three of them jumped when Astrid entered the Academy with her bow slung over her chest. She glared at all three of them, arms crossed and eyes narrowed into slits. Fishlegs squeaked and the twins tried to hide behind each other, failing miserably.

"No reason!" Tuffnut squeaked. "Trying to avoid conversation so we can be on time!"

"On time for what?" Astrid growled.

"Something important, duh," Ruffnut snorted. Astrid cocked her head to the side and pursed her lips.

"You're not going to tell me, hmm?" Astrid challenged. Fishlegs looked away and the twins cleared their throats. She scoffed and turned around swiftly. "Fine, then. Keep your secrets. I'm going to go for a hunt and have way more fun than all of you."

She left the arena and Fishlegs relaxed. "That was closeâ€¦ Can you believe what she'd do if she found out?"

"I don't want to know. I kinda don't want to come back if it's going to be anything like I imagine," Ruffnut replied. "Let's go."

"Wait, what am I supposed to even say to the northerners?" Fishlegs scrambled. "Something like, 'hey, your daughter may be the lucky winner of our chief's son's hand, come along and find out'?"

Tuffnut laughed under his breath as he climbed onto Belch's neck, securing himself to his saddle. "Try that and tell me how that goes. Seriously, though, I have no idea. Just the basics, I dunno. Tell them we have food and the wedding we've all been waiting for and they'll set sail soon enough."

They took to flight and went their separate directions while Astrid stood against the wall outside the arena, eyes wide and heart frozen. Her knuckles were snow white and she forgot how to think.

* * *

><p>Astrid didn't return to Hiccup's bedside for weeks. She fixed her roof with newfound determination secretly fueled by her anger. She smashed the hammer over and over into the nails that held the wood to her roof in the rain, grunting and gritting her teeth as blisters on her paws cracked open and made her hand hurt more than a Terror bite.</p>

Why was she even mad? Why should she care? She had her chance at marriage, she gave it up. She knew the answer in the back of her head: because I love Hiccup. But she shoved it away and banged the nails into the wood harder as if it would replace her thoughts. It

didn't help. She wanted it to.

Town folk talked among each other, wondering why she spent hours on the roof alone, rain or shine or even snow until blood ran from her palms down her arms. No one knew, no one else was told yet of the engagement. And she wasn't supposed to know, either. But that was stupid; of course Hiccup would have an arranged marriage. Of course they would marry him off to better the clan. She shouldn't let it get to her. But she did and it was ruining her hands, if anything.

The roof was done faster than anyone expected, especially since Astrid refused anyone to help her. She wanted to be alone. Even after the other returned from their mission, they acted as if nothing was amiss, though they suspected she knew something. Why else would she be so angry at shingles and nails? Why else would she avoid Hiccup for over a fortnight?

Then one day, she found a new outlet for her rage. She went to her home to clean up the rest of the internal damage when she found a note on a table: meet me where you met him.

She recognized the symbols and ran her bandaged finger over them. Hiccup's writing was almost unmistakable: the symbols had the straightest lines as if they were blueprints of themselves. She ripped up the note and tossed it into the hearth before she left the house slowly. She climbed onto Stormfly and secured herself, giving her a small rub to the head. They lifted off and Astrid flew silently to the cove, where Astrid had first met Toothless.

It was a cold day, but clear, so she had no trouble finding the small break in the ground, the shimmering pond, the huge trees that seemed to grow from nothing. When she landed, she immediately felt sick. She only ever returned to the cove when she needed to; this place held bad memories for her. Her stomach cramped at the thought of how she took her knife, hid behind a boulder, breathed deeply, prayed to the gods, and took away her innocence as messily as she could handle, hoping it would be ugly enough to prove she had been touched. How foolish that was. Gothi healed her up just fine, the cuts too clean to make sense. It only bought her time; that was her understanding of it.

She found Toothless drinking at the far edge of the pond. He peered up and looked away as if she were a bird â€“ nothing of consequence â€“ and continued drinking.

"What do you want?" she asked bluntly. She didn't know where Hiccup would be.

"Tree," was Hiccup's muffled reply. She was nearest to the largest tree in the cove and walked around it, unamused. She found Hiccup leaning against the trunk, holding his side for reassurance and staring out at the water. He smiled at her and greeted her. Astrid didn't return the grin.

"What?" she repeated coldly.

Hiccup's smile faltered and he furrowed his brow. "Why so harsh? Everything okay?"

"What do you think?" she retorted. Hiccup frowned.

"Someone told you, didn't they?" he said quietly.

Astrid scoffed and placed her hands on her hips. Even that hurt her fingers. "Sucks when your scouts also happen to be my scouts. So you're standing, that means your bride will be revealed."

"Don't call her that," Hiccup interrupted. He faced Astrid with newfound annoyance.

"Why not? That's what she's going to be. The wife of Hiccup Haddock Horrendous III, heiress to the tribe of Berk and all her resources, the woman who has no name or residence on this stupid island" "

"Stop," Hiccup muttered.

" the woman you will fill with as many children as your house will fit" "

"Stop it!" Hiccup sneered angrily. Astrid liked him angry. It made her feel better, finally.

" the woman who will beg you to get rid of your dragon to focus on her and her foreign ideals" "

"Can you not hear me?!"

" the woman who was simply born, named, and specially selected to breed with you because of her looks or etiquette or whatever other horseshit they've fed her to prepare her for this."

Hiccup threw up his hands in anger. "What the hell are you getting out of this?! You think I wanted this?!"

"I dunno, Hiccup, why aren't you trying to stop it?!"

"I can't stop what's already been decided! I've tried not eating, I've tried reopening my wounds just to avoid today, but I couldn't help but talk to you!"

Astrid glared and flared her nostrils. She shoved Hiccup back. "Why would you want to talk to me about this?! Does your brain not work or something? Did that Skrill burn out all your sense?! Have you been absolutely blind to everything?!"

"NO!" Hiccup cried. "AND THAT'S THE PROBLEM!"

Astrid threw the first punch and hit her mark. Hiccup's head snapped to the side and his nose began to bleed. He steadied himself and held the tree for support. Astrid puffed out her chest and crouched. He flicked his gaze at her and he blinked painfully, wiping away the blood from his lip.

"You hit me."

"Yes I did. It felt wonderful."

Astrid smiled horribly, her body vibrating with anger and rage.

"Why would you do that?" he asked, exasperated.

"I needed to hit something, it's what I do. Some people are not pleased to hear certain things, and you marrying a foreigner is not pleasing."

Hiccup stood up straight. "Yeah? You're angry about her being foreign? Not the fact that she isn't you?"

That hit Astrid in the stomach like a fully grown Gronckel. She hadn't expected that. Hiccup wasn't one for fighting back or for being bold. He was supposed to take the blows, show how much pain he was in, and make her feel better. He wasn't supposed to hurt her instead. And that made it even worse for Hiccup, mark her words.

She screamed out in tearful turmoil and lunged for Hiccup, grabbing his collar and shoving him down to the ground. She lifted his shoulders and smashed them down again and again as if she wanted to make a new cove. Hiccup growled and grabbed onto her and rolled them over and over, trying to restrain her. Astrid bit his arm with all her might and Hiccup hit her cheek to make her let go. They both threw fists at each other, yelling and screaming and cursing and growling. Their legs became entwined and Astrid took the opportunity to bend her knee as fast as she could, shoving her thigh into Hiccup's groin. He fell back off her, holding himself for a moment, trying to catch his breath.

Astrid took that time to grab a rock and hurl it at him. "You take that back!" she shrieked. Hiccup rolled out of the way of the flying rock and struggled to his feet. Both of their faces were bruising and bleeding, the pair of them catching their breath. She hurled another rock.

"Why should I?!" he yelled back, ducking away. "It's true!"

"SHUT UP!"

"MAKE ME!"

"THEN STOP DODGING MY ROCKS!"

"Admit it!" Hiccup challenged.

"Why would I ever want to marry someone like you?!"

Hiccup faltered and a rock hit his torso. He hissed and grabbed his side. He fell to a knee and hugged himself. Astrid had another rock locked and loaded.

"You're nothing but a boy who lets himself get pushed and pulled around by everyone because you have no purpose!"

Hiccup fell forward and caught himself with a hand. He was in a lot of pain, both from his wounds and her words.

"Why would I love you?!" she choked. Hiccup sneered and stared up.

"Because I'd love you back," he spat.

Astrid stumbled back and her mouth fell open. She forgot to breathe. Hiccup glared at her in anger and pain.

"Because I would protect you with my life, my soul, and I would let you beat me into a pulp to feel better about yourself " I'd let you break my bones if it gave you any relief. You have lived through misery and I wanted to be the one who pulled you from it."

He forced himself to his feet while Astrid felt her eyes fill with tears of shock.

"Because I know what you've lost, what you've done, who you are. I didn't let a Skrill maim me to give me a pretty scar, I did it so you wouldn't lose the only person you have left. Because I couldn't let that happen to you."

His eyes, too, filled with tears as he gritted his teeth.

"I don't want to get married to her. I don't want to force myself to love someone in a month when I have tried to not love you for seven years, before you even noticed me as being something other than the town disaster!"

His voice cracked and he looked at her with pleading eyes.

"I can't," he sobbed.

He took the first step and grabbed onto her face, holding her cheeks, pressing his lips on hers with all the force he had contained in his being. Astrid gasped under his breath and wrapped her arms around his shoulders, kissing him back and sobbing against his face. He held onto her and kissed her over and over. They parted their lips to taste each other further, to feel the others' tongue for the first time.

Passionate and desperate, Hiccup pushed her back against the huge tree, the taste of her so irresistible that he wanted more. Not sexually, but more. She held onto him as they pressed against each other through their riding suits, tragically tasting each other's tears and muffled moans escaping their lips. Hiccup pulled back to catch his breath, kissing her face all over and returning to her mouth. He pulled away again to rest his forehead on hers and they held each other for what felt like an eternity and yet not long enough before the horn from Berk shattered the veil of their newly-confessed love, announcing the arrival of Hiccup's bride.

6. Two Crowns

It's been a long week, to be sure! Again, thank you to the new followers and favourites, and to those kind enough to review (sometimes as each chapter uploads; you know who you are). Here is a nice long chapter to pick us back up where we left off. _

* * *

><p>Chapter Six: Two Crowns

The horn blew and the pair looked at each other. Their shoulders sank

and their lips quivered. He kissed her again as if it would stop them from hearing and they held onto each other. Hiccup buried his face in her shoulder and she smashed her face into his chest, clutching at him desperately.

"This isn't fair," Astrid whimpered into his riding suit. "I hate this."

Hiccup took a deep breath and lifted her chin. "Me tooâ€| but I have to. I tried everything, Astrid, and I can'tâ€|"

"Evenâ€| reopening your woundsâ€|" Astrid quoted shakily. Hiccup stiffened as if he never meant to say that. She looked up at him and nodded, sniffing loudly. "Wowâ€|"

She saw it in his eyes, the memory, the pain of hurting himself once more, maybe twice to buy some more time, and it sickened her. She nodded and stepped away. She wiped the tears from her face and readjusted her hair. She looked up at him and found it hard to keep eye contact. "You look awful."

Hiccup squinted. "You do, too. Sorry."

She shrugged and ran her hand up her arm sheepishly. "You knowâ€| maybe you'll like her. Or maybe we can come here sometimes to beat the crap out of each other if you don't."

Hiccup winced and forced a chuckle. "I don't think that will be possibleâ€| if I'm married, I'm married. If we're fighting, chances are we won't be after we feel better."

She nodded and held back her tears. She took a deep breath and moved away. But he cupped her elbow and turned her towards him. He had a pained smile on his face, a bruise forming over his cheek bone, and he hoisted her over his shoulder.

"Gah! Hiccup, let me GO!" she cried out as she kicked. Hiccup held onto her and readjusted her weight over his shoulder like a sack of potatoes. He laughed and walked her to the water. He winced as he did so, but Astrid noticed how easy it was for him to carry her. He had carried her like that before years ago for fun and they both fell on their faces. But today, it was little to no issue. She even noticed his back muscles moving under his riding suit. She blushed.

"I didn't ask you to meet me here to talk about marriage," Hiccup grunted. "I wanted to show you something."

"If this is another ridiculous invention that could potentially take off my head, I swear to the gods that I will beat you with your own leg!" Astrid yelled. Hiccup shrugged, forcing the air out of her lungs. He dropped her right into Toothless' saddle, who had been silently waiting for them. Astrid glared at Hiccup as he grinned up at her. He handed her a helmet of sorts. He looked at it without touching it. She wrinkled her nose.

"What is that?" she asked sourly. "It looks like a bucket."

"I guess you could see it as that. It's a bucket for your face."

Hiccup forced it onto her head and Astrid looked at him with the most unamused glare she could muster. "Why?" she sneered horrendously.

"To protect you from the wind. Like my suit."

"Which looks bizarre in itself," she muttered. Hiccup laughed again.

"This baby protects me from everything! I mean, I made yours too, can't you tell that you're more comfortable flying?"

"Not against the freezing sea, apparently," she scowled. "And not made for a woman, initially."

Hiccup looked away, eyebrows raised in embarrassment. "Aaaand we'll leave that conversation there."

Astrid laughed this time as Hiccup put his own helmet on to cover his face. He tightened some straps on his suit, rubbed his side for good measure, and climbed in front of her. He buckled the harness to his suit, clipped his leg into the tail-pedal. He looked over his shoulders, his eyes the only thing visible. He looked to Stormfly and gave her the hand signal to go home. Astrid groaned and wrapped her arms around Hiccup.

"Should you be flying?" she asked. "You're still hurt."

"Yeah, but this will be worth it. I can't wait to hear your reaction."

"And that doesn't make me feel better at AHHHH!"

Toothless exploded into the air, soaring straight up. Her heart slammed into her spine and she clutched at Hiccup desperately. They kept flying up and up, Hiccup cheering and Astrid finding the same thrill. She laughed as she got used to it and Toothless entered the clouds. Astrid's thrill was soon replaced by concern. This was the highest she had ever gone.

Toothless leveled out and Hiccup unbuckled his harness. Astrid squeaked. He smiled and turned his body to face hers, straddling Toothless backwards. Astrid panicked.

"Nope, no, not cool, turn around, turn around right now!"

"Come here."

He grabbed her and pulled her close. He brought his legs up and crossed them so his entire body was on top of Toothless, and not around him. "Okay, put your foot in the pedal."

"No."

"Come on!" he whined. She gulped and inched her foot forward until it touched the pedal. She eased her foot into it and felt the clip wrap around her ankle. She looked up at Hiccup who readied himself.

"Okay, on three, grab on to the reins."

"But you're sitting on them!" she growled.

"One!"

"Hiccup, what are you doing?!"

"Two!"

"I swear, if you â€"

"Three!"

Hiccup raised his arms and fell off Toothless, sliding over the edge into nothingness, falling into the clouds. Astrid screamed and Toothless reared his head. She wriggled her foot in the pedal, hyperventilating, wondering if she was supposed to catch him. Cranking her foot down, Toothless dove.

Suddenly, Hiccup emerged from the clouds wearing a wing suit. The stretch of leather between his arms and her ankles were taut with leather. Astrid wrenched up on Toothless, crying out, trying to avoid him as she watched him soar through the air, cheering and swooping.

"WHAT ARE YOU DOING?"

"Flying! Catch me if you can!"

Astrid swore under her breath. She placed a hand on Toothless' head. "Go get him. I'll do what I can."

Toothless roared and began to glide after him, swooping underneath his rider as he flew above. Astrid tried to reach up to grab him but Hiccup pulled an arm in and banked to the side. Astrid glared, her competitiveness rising within her.

Astrid and Toothless tore after him, Toothless obviously letting his rider get away. But Astrid gently cranked the tail pedal to make Toothless go even faster. She wasn't used to his back or his saddle. Stormfly's shoulders were wider apart and she had a crown of spikes to hold onto and avoid if she threw herself off. They charged after Hiccup through the sea stacks and beacon pillars before Astrid lunged forward and grabbed him. She wrenched him back and pinned him down to the saddle, almost losing her balance.

She proceeded to hit him over and over. "Don't you ever do that again!"

He merely laughed.

The three of them soared high over the island and quieted when they saw the ships approaching the island, peppering the blue water. Astrid let Hiccup replace her in the saddle and she put her cheek on his back. "She's on one of those boatsâ€!"

"Don't remind me."

Astrid gave his body a squeeze. "You know when Toothless lands, that's it. We won't be able to do this anymore."

Hiccup was silent for a minute before he reached down towards his foot and cranked a lever back. Toothless' tail jammed open and Hiccup turned himself around. It was steady so high up in the air and Hiccup pulled off his helmet. His hair whipped about hilariously as he tossed it nonchalantly into the air.

"Your helmet!" she gasped. Hiccup shrugged and pulled hers off.

"Toothless can only glide for so long."

He dropped her helmet and pulled her close. He kissed her deeply, passionately, holding onto her freshly bruised and cut face, running a thumb over her cheekbone. Astrid's heart soared as she felt the power of Toothless beneath her and the air around her, the taste of Hiccup on her lips, as they flew through the clouds, knowing it was the last chance they'd get. She wrapped her legs around his waist simply to get closer to him — kissing while straddling a dragon was too much effort, and she wrapped her arm around his neck. She kissed him and tasted him and let herself go for once, forgetting for a tragic moment that someone else was waiting for him.

* * *

><p>Stoick glared when Hiccup entered the house. "The horn blew an hour ago!"<p>

Hiccup was pale, his eyes red. But Stoick knew it was because of the wind. It didn't explain the cuts on his face and the awkward angle to his nose. Hiccup didn't look up at first.

"Your face. What happened to it?" he asked, unamused. "It looks like someone beat the snot out of you."

Hiccup breathed deeply and responded quietly. "Rough landing. I'm fine."

Stoick straightened his shoulders and he smacked a hand on Hiccup's back. Hiccup groaned and held his side as his father broke out into joyous laughter.

"My boy, you have no idea how proud I am of this day. For years, I have waited and waited to read your mother's scroll, to see who she picked for you eighteen years ago! You were a wee lad then, but nowâ€ The next month will bring much celebration! Sword fights, dances, dragon tournaments, everything!"

Hiccup stepped away and raised an eyebrow. "A month?"

"I know you want to marry right away but these things take time, my boy."

"Dad, stop," Hiccup sighed. He rubbed his eyes. "Please, stop."

Stoick stepped back and furrowed his eyebrows. "Why? Aren't you happy? We have three clans here with beautiful daughters, all of whom ready to see you wed!"

"I don't want to marry someone from another clan," Hiccup said sternly.

"You're getting cold feet, I get it, it's normal!" Stoick sighed, throwing his hands to his sides. "The other clans aren't bad, Hiccup."

"Dad! I don't want to go up on some stage and proclaim my love to someone who I don't even know!"

Stoick frowned. "Sonâ€¢ when I found out I was to wed your mother, I felt the same way. But I didn't think I could fall in love and when I read her name out, it was the most wonderful feeling an old brute like me could feel. Don't you want the same feeling?"

Hiccup wanted to say he already felt it. He didn't need a piece of paper to help him with that. "I wanted it to be my choice."

"Ah." Stoick put his fists on his hips and looked about the house for a moment. "You're going to be chief one day, son. And that means things are not necessarily going to turn out the way you want them to. You're going to open that scroll and honour your mother's wishes. Understood?"

All he got was a scoff and a wide stare. "Seriously? That's what you're going to say?"

"_Understood_?" Stoick growled. Hiccup threw his hands up in the air and groaned in defeat.

"Fine. Whatever."

Stoick leaned back and smiled again. "Well then. Clean yourself up. The clans are meeting in the Great Hall and I want you looking your best, mingle with them, find out who's who."

He moved to leave, but stopped himself. He reached out and cracked Hiccup's nose back to it's original position. Hiccup gasped and held his face as a gush of blood spilled from one of his nostrils. "You'll find some clothes I had the seamstresses make for today. Prepare for rain tonight."

His father gave him a smile and a nod and left the house. When the door opened, Hiccup could hear the villagers taking loudly, as if there were hundreds of people outside. There probably were. Hiccup wiped the new stream of blood from his nostril and stormed upstairs, where Toothless peaked his head in to see him. He saw his rider upset and tried to cheer him up by grinning a huge toothless grin at him. Hiccup for once couldn't return the favour and found the clothes on his bed. He looked away from them and inadvertently looked at the chest laying on his shelf. He squeezed his eyes shut and dug his palms into his face.

He didn't want to think about it. But Astrid tore off Toothless as soon as he touched the ground and ran into her house. No other words, nothing. They eventually pulled from each other so they could land and it hurt. Hiccup put a hand over his heart and blinked for a few moments, feeling. He hadn't really felt the flutter before, but now it was there, he felt it was the most unfair thing he could have felt.

* * *

><p>The clothes were soon on and his face was washed. He looked down at himself and felt ridiculous. The clothing was normal, maybe even fancy: a new cotton shirt that was tight around the wrists and loose everywhere else, with a collar that hung open over his chest save for a few undone laces for protection. The shirt was white with red embellishments, and he wore black trousers with it. A huge belt with a dragon crest wrapped around his hips and he had his chiefdom crown that he only wore on the most important occasions. This meant he had never worn it before, save for Astrid's memorial to her parents and all those lost to the river poison and the Outcast raid.</p>

He placed it on his head. It was simple, a gold band that circled his head and did nothing but show he was the chief's son. It made him look different. He didn't like it. He ran his hand over his chin and wrinkled his face to the sight of stubble coming in and the bruises becoming very noticeable. Astrid certainly had a mean fist. And she was good with rocks. And kissing.

"Stop it!" Hiccup growled at himself. He smacked himself over the head and grabbed the chest. He clutched it as if opening it would ruin his life, and he'd be damned if that wasn't the truth.

The walk to the Great Hall was a short one. It had been hours since Stoick went ahead without him, and he couldn't stall anymore. He wanted to see her again, but it would make things worse. He really wanted to take his drawing book and fly to a sea stack to create a new invention, maybe something to add to his shield or his leg. Or maybe a new sketch of the Skrill, now that he'd been acquainted with one a lot better (his side seized at the thought) or maybe he'd draw a personâ€¦ he'd drawn a few people in the past, and it wasn't exactly the same as drawing blueprints.

He pulled open the Great Hall door, the sounds of loud kinsmen booming and echoing through the thick wood, and stepped inside.

"Ah, there he is!" a girl shrieked. Hiccup jumped at the sound and almost walked out before Toothless came up behind him and nudged him forward. Many people cheered and bowed, but a girl and her posse of ladies surrounded him. The head of the group of ladies grabbed onto his wrist and hauled him into her group.

"I have been waiting my whole life to meet you," she began shrilly. "I've sorted everything!"

Hiccup could only stammer and stare at her. She was a pompous sort of girl, slightly shorter than he but wearing the most outlandish and unreasonable clothing he had ever seen. She was wearing a dress, but it was poofed and raised and pinched in ways that made her look like a honey bee. It was bright red and her hair had been braided in ways that made Hiccup dizzy. And she wore paint on her face. She looked terrifying.

"I've sized rings, I've made arrangements to have a second saddle made for your fierce dragon, I've lined up your wardrobe, everything!"

Hiccup swallowed. "And your name is?"

"Aw, sugarplum, my name is Barb, were you so quick to forget your wife's name?"

Hiccup wavered and Toothless, great at picking up Hiccup's cues, caught the simple hand gesture he made and did what he was commanded. He hissed at Barb, shining his teeth at her and sending her flailing back.

Hiccup made his escape and struggled to get through the crowd, who all wanted to shake his hand or sell their daughter to him. Someone barred his way and Hiccup stumbled back. A huge woman in leather armour glared down at him. Her hair was wet and unruly, her brown eyes bearing into him fiercely. She had a hand on the hilt of a great sword and she looked at Toothless with hatred gleaming in her eyes.

"Ah. You let that thing inside," she spat. Hiccup glared.

"That thing is Toothless, and he's my dragon."

"Oh, I have no doubt," the woman admitted, "but it's inside. It should be hanging on a wall."

Hiccup was usually gentle, even ignorant to certain things. Insulting or threatening Toothless was not one of them. He shoved her back and she stumbled. She smiled harshly.

"Ah. Nice to see the potential father of my children isn't a total guppy."

Hiccup and a group of villagers surrounding him stepped away, looking to her and to him over and over. He wanted to hurl, not because she was ugly, but the thought of sleeping with her made his whole body hurt.

He staggered and stumbled to the front of the Great Hall, already regretting not running away. But he also noticed that Astrid wasn't there. She was nowhere to be found. That struck a nerve within him, but at least Toothless kept everyone away. He was good at that, especially when Hiccup was having an exceptionally hard time around people. But it had never been this bad; hundreds of people he didn't recognize stared at him with skeptical gazes harsh enough to bore a hole through his chest. His side hurt and his nose ached and by the time he limped up the stairs, his body was shaking and his vision blurred around the edges.

"Are you alright?" a gentle voice asked. A soft hand steadied him. He didn't even know he was falling over before the unfamiliar girl righted him. He looked up and saw a kind face with a soft smile, lovely green eyes like his own and cheeks rosy from the heat of the fire and people around them. Her black hair weaved around a braid of leather and her dress was practical to the point of looking normal. She was also young. Maybe thirteen or fourteen. She pulled her hands back.

"I'm sorry. My name is Rose."

Hiccup smiled gratefully. Rose stepped back and looked around timidly. "Rose? What does that mean?"

"I'm told it's a lovely flower. Red or white or maybe other colours. And the stem has thorns. But I've never seen one, so I'm not sure if I do the name justice."

"It's nice to meet you, Rose. Who did you come with?"

Rose hesitated before sheepishly looking outward. "I was sent as a representative to one of the clans who couldn't make it. I have been waiting very long to meet you. You look like him, you know. Your father."

Hiccup motioned to the box. "So your name. It could be here."

"I certainly hope not," she said very quickly. Hiccup raised an eyebrow.

"You're the first one to say that."

Rose bit her lip. "It's justâ€œ I have someone else. At home. They're waiting for me to come back. I was to come when the marriage was announced and return to them. If it is written, thenâ€œ that will be an awkward thing to explain."

Hiccup smiled and bowed his head. "Then I hope for your sake that your name isn't on this piece of paper. But I don't understandâ€œ you sailed here alone?"

"I sailed with trader Johann from my island. It was a long trip but I feel it'll be worth it."

Hiccup nodded. Rose looked at him and smiled again, but she was also wary. She cocked her head to the side and grinned. "Ah. It seems you didn't want to see my name on the scroll either."

Hiccup stared at her through his eyelashes. "What gave it away?"

"I can see you thinking of another face. My mother does it all the time when she thinks of my father. She stares off and you can see his face behind her eyes. You have the same ghost in your face."

Hiccup blinked at little Rose, who looked straight into his eyes. He looked away and looked at the scroll. Rose smiled and rested her hands on the chest.

"Have you read it, yet?" she asked quietly.

Hiccup looked up, confused. "No."

Rose looked up and beamed. "I can't wait to hear what she says. I hope she's beautiful."

"Hiccup?" a voice murmured behind him. Hiccup tensed everywhere and Rose looked over his shoulder.

"Astrid?" Hiccup breathed. Rose raised her eyebrows and smiled, spinning away and leaving Hiccup alone on the platform. He didn't know how to turn, but when he did, he saw Astrid. And she looked stunning.

Her face was about as bruised as his, and one of her cheeks was swollen, but the redness made her icy blue eyes leap out at him. She was wearing peaceful clothes instead of her riding suit, or her armour. Her dress was a pale yellow; maybe it was white at some point; and her hair was braided over one of her shoulders, but not intricately. Her hair was long, he realized, when she didn't braid it extensively into itself, like she usually did behind her neck to keep it out of the way. She wore her circlet around her head, silver, and Hiccup had only seen it at once other occasion.

"Nice crown," she said quietly.

They had only worn their crowns at her parents' wake.

"You, too."

Astrid nodded to Rose, who peeked at the two of them and quickly spiraled away. "She's pretty."

"She's young."

"Out of all the girl's I've seen drooling over you, I like her the most."

"She doesn't want me."

"'Want' doesn't matter tonight, as you probably gathered."

Hiccup frowned. "Why are you doing this to yourself?"

Astrid didn't expect that question. She smoothed the fabric of her dress and caught her breath.

"I don't know, maybe to support you?"

Hiccup bit his lip and looked over the guests of the Great Hall. "I'm about to read another woman's name and you're going to pretend like it's not going to hurt?"

"That's exactly what I'm going to do," she replied. She forced a smile on her lips and shrugged playfully. "Besides, since this is a big deal, Berk is putting on some events. Dragon races, duels, everything. And I'm going to win them all."

He could tell this was her way of protecting herself so he played along. It almost tore his heart out to laugh with her when they had been passionately kissing that morning. Toothless knocked Hiccup aside and nuzzled her skirt, begging for a scratch behind the fins. Astrid obliged and Stoick clasped Hiccup's back.

"Everyone, gather around! It's time! Clansmen and daughters, let us rejoice! For it is time that my boy, my son and future chief to this island, the man who brought peace between men and dragons, will finally find out who his bride is!"

The room exploded with cheer and laughter. Hiccup was too terrified and nervous to smile. But Stoick laughed and waved a hand to silenced the crowd.

"When my boy was only three winters old, his mother asked to pick his

future bride. So I gave her a scroll and let her be and I kept her scroll safe for eighteen more winters, praying to the gods he'd live to open it. Little more than a month has passed since Hiccup's latest feat. Fighting a Skrill to save a Dragonling, he was wounded to the point where I thought he'd be lost to us. So when he wasn't I decided it was time."

People cheered again and Astrid made her way to the back of the hall, smiling at that last comment. No matter how tonight would end, she would always be thankful for her sister's life.

Stoick looked down at Hiccup and smiled. "Go ahead, son. Open it. Speak loud, speak true."

Hiccup looked over all the faces. Barb and her gang of atrociously dressed fangirls, the large woman with the bloodlust issue when it came to Toothless, Rose with her encouraging smileâ€| the twines faces suddenly appeared as they gawked up at him, Snotlout and his wife Wormha smiling, Fishlegs eating at the side with a grin over his face, and even Gobber, who was next to wasted but still enthusiastic.

Hiccup stared at them all and felt Toothless bonk his legs. He felt strong, but he felt sick. He gripped the clasp of the chest and opened it slowly. The entire hall went quiet as he reached inside and grabbed the scroll.

Astrid couldn't do it. She thought she could but when she saw the old paper in his hand, she had to slip out. It was pouring outside â€“ it usually went from rain to shine and back again in a matter of minutes â€“ and she let the rain pelt her as she ran from the doorway and away from the name on the scroll.

Without noticing her departure, Hiccup opened the scroll and the crowd was freakishly quiet. He cleared his throat and blinked at the scroll. Stoick watched him read. And he read and read and read. He didn't stop reading.

Dearest Hiccup, it said. It's your mother. And if you're reading this right now, it means you're in the Great Hall surrounded by hundreds of people. It also means I am no longer with you. It means I have left you here alone and for that, I am so sorry.

I'm lying in bed and your father is fixing our house. A Zippelback wrecked the chimney I fear, but it means I get to spend some alone time with you. You keep squirming on my lap. You want to go outside. You are adventurous and hilariously tiny for your age. But I wanted to take this time to write you one last letter in case I go on an adventure myself and never come back.

My son, I told your father that I would pick your bride for you. And it's true, I have picked a lady for you to wed. But I want you to know that I would have given anything to be there with you on that platform. Maybe I never need to give you this note and I watch you grow into a man. But it's something I have to accept, being a Viking when there are dragons and Outcasts circling our island.

Now, your bride. I told your father that I would pick someone from another clan. And I don't know if she is. All I know is he needed to know something so I could get my way with this. If I am not there

anymore, it means I have one more gift to give you as your mother. The person I have chosen for you!_

"Hiccup? What does it say?"

Hiccup raised a hand to shut his father up, the scroll saying something he did not expect. The crowd gasped at the gesture, but Hiccup kept reading, his heart pounding and a lump in his throat forming.

_â€œis the girl who makes you feel bigger than a hiccup. Larger than a dragon. Softer than fresh cotton. She may be the fiercest dragon fighter, the gentlest bread maker, the smartest hunter. Maybe she slays dragons. Maybe she adores them. Maybe she wishes she could fly them. I know I want to. _

_She's the girl who will punch you across your face when you make her angry and kiss your cheek once she realizes you're sorry. She's the girl who laughs at the way you look and the way you speak not because she's making fun of you, but because she adores you. She's the one who looks radiant in anything because no matter what she does, she's always the same woman: the one who stole your heart. _

_I'm not saying to find a pretty face in a crowd. I am asking you to find the face you are looking for right now. When your father told you that I had picked for you, did you hope it was a specific girl? Did you think I would choose someone without knowing she had your heart? Since I am gone, I need you to find that girl, the one who you are aching for right now. _

_I don't need to tell you her name. I don't need to know it. She is strong. She is beautiful. She is perfect and maybe you're the only one who thinks so. She's the one you would die for, let a dragon kill you for, risk everything for. It's what I would do for you and if you're reading this now, it means I have done that. So look up and find her, Hiccup. Find her and kiss her and tell her you love her, that her name was on this scroll. A name won't mean anything to you unless it's hers, so let it be so. Life is too short to hesitate.

-

I love you, my sweet little Hiccup, and I will be there beside you. You may not see me, but I'll be there. Now go.

Hiccup's hand shook as he pulled the scroll away from his eyes. Everyone was waiting as Stoick furrowed his brows when he saw his son's face wet with tears. He looked stunned. He looked to his father and reminded himself to breathe.

"So who is it?!" Barb shrieked from across the hall. "Just say it!"

Hiccup didn't look at her, he kept his eyes on his dad. He handed him the paper and smiled, tears in his eyes, joyous sobs escaping his lips.

"I love my mother," he choked. "I love her so much."

Stoick looked down and began to read while Hiccup tried to find her. But she wasn't there. So he leapt from the platform and forced his way to the door. Many people jumped out of the way with how fast he

sprinted, Toothless roaring behind him in triumph. He wrenched open the door into the rain and ran so fast he slipped so many times. The rain soaked right through to his skin as he raced down the muddy hill, his side screaming in pain, his wound reopening slightly with every stumble and slip. But he was laughing. He was laughing so hard he couldn't breathe.

He saw a figure trudging through the rain. The yellow dress clung to her legs and her long braid sagged from all the water.

"Astrid!" Hiccup tried to yell, too exhausted to be heard.
"ASTRID!"

Astrid turned and glared. "Leave me alone," she yelled over the storm. "I don't want to know her name, I don't want to hear anything."

Hiccup slowed and grabbed her arms. He couldn't breathe and he grabbed her face.

"I love you!" he wheezed.

Astrid's eyes went wide. Hair stuck to her face and she shivered in the pounding rain. "What?"

"I love you," he repeated with more air in his lungs. "I love you."

"Stop it, it's not funny," she said. Her chin quivered and she held onto his face. "We both know my name couldn't be on that scroll. It can't be. I'm not from another clan, I hurt my innocence, I-I-I can't, it can't be!"

"She's letting me choose," Hiccup cried. "She's letting me choose and I'm choosing you!"

Astrid looked at his eyes frantically. "But why me?! What could I give you?"

"You don't have to give me anything but your hand. Marry me, promise me you'll marry me before the clans catch up and make me choose someone else."

Astrid couldn't form words, her body cold and on fire all at once. Her heart was beating so fast she wavered in his arms. Hiccup kissed her, hard. He pulled away and pressed his forehead to hers.

"Please, Astrid. When we heard that it could be someone else, we were devastated. Now we have a chance to be together. We don't have to touch, we don't have to agree on everything, we don't have to do anything. But I don't want anyone else and I am praying that you feel the same."

Time stopped. The rain suspended in midair and Hiccup stared into Astrid's eyes as she closed them, breathed, and pulled away.

"I get to pick what I wear, then," she said.

Hiccup cried out in joy and scooped her up in his arms, kissing her face over and over. She laughed too, the pair of them crying in the

rain. They kissed and kissed and held onto each other while Stoick read the rest of the note, tears in his eyes. He left the Great Hall and looked to the raining sky. A storm cloud parted and he saw the stars beyond. He touched his fingers to his lips, kissed them, and waved to the clouds, whispering an 'I love you' to the sky. He knew his wife heard it, and he looked down the hill to see a tiny Hiccup carrying a figure in soft yellow, spinning her around and around.

There were hundreds of people crammed into that building. Hundreds from the island and the other clans. But the happiest two were out in the freezing rain away from the fires, because they had finally gotten what they had wanted the most in the world: each other.

7. The Fight, The Chase, The Stars

Hello, all! Again, thank you to all those who have recently followed our adventure and commented on it. I have been having some annoying troubles with the laptop but now that I have a window to breathe, I have another chappie! Enjoy. :)

* * *

><p>Chapter Seven: The Fight, The Chase, The Stars

Stoick smiled to himself as he watched Hiccup and Astrid down the hill, but that happiness was soon shattered by a scream behind him.

"What's he doing?!" Barb shrieked. "Who is that girl?!"

"That is my son's betrothed," Stoick replied simply, ushering her back inside. Barb sneered and punched Stoick's chest. She hurt her own hand and did nothing to the chief, but Spitelout and Gobber, Stoick's right hands, seized her and hauled her away.

"She's not from another clan!" Barb screamed. "He broke the rules!"

"The rule was he was allowed to choose, and he did," Stoick replied, raising his hands to quiet the freshly disturbed clansmen. "My son has chosen his bride. That was what my wife wanted, and that is what he shall get."

"It's not fair!" Barb cried, paint running down her face. Her father came up behind her and held onto her, shooting a glare at Stoick. Stoick held his ground. praying this would not fester into something unmanageable. Tension between the clans was not what he needed.

"It was a mistake coming here," the brutish girl remarked. "Some marriage contract. I thought this would expand our clans, not keep it isolated to this godforsaken island."

"Watch your tongue, Cauli," her father sneered. "He is still the chief."

"As if," was her retort. "Why did we travel all this way if this was the answer?"

Stoick sighed and pursed his lips. "There will be a wedding, regardless. Stay, feast, and be merry. Either way, this is joyous news and there will still be new treaties signed and arranged, that will not change. New negotiations of the allied clans have been scribed and are waiting your review, just as it would have been regardless."

That seemed to keep a lot of clansmen at bay. Rose looked out the doors and turned to Stoick with a smile. "I'm glad that's all sorted, then!"

Stoick chuckled as he waved to Hiccup and Astrid far yonder to come back. There was much left to do in the night.

Hiccup pried himself from Astrid's frigid face and looked back. Astrid huddled against him for warmth but didn't find much. She touched her hand to his side and found it spotted minimally with tiny splotches of blood. Toothless bounded towards them and licked Astrid's face as if he already knew the news and the two of them clambered behind him and let him carry them proudly back into the Great Hall.

Clothing soaked and muddy and slightly stained with red, the two were applauded and covered in heavy blankets. The crowd parted so they could walk up the platform to the fire. They shivered and awkwardly looked out to the crowd. Some were smiling. Some were scowling. Hiccup laughed nervously and the whole room vibrated with giggles and chuckles and chortles.

"Back to the ceremony!" Stoick bellowed. "Son, tell the clans your decision."

Hiccup let down his blanket to let a matron check his ribs. He lifted the shirt and the room gasped at once, sucking the air in and suspending it as they saw the ugly cut formed partially into a scar and spilt open at the sides. The matron dabbed at it with a clean cloth as Hiccup looked to Astrid, who couldn't help but smile.

"So, uhâ€œ!" Hiccup began, "that was not what I expected."

Another communal laugh released the gasp and the matron released his shirt and brought his blanket back over his shoulders.

"The scroll my mother wrote didn't have a single name on it. In fact, there were no names on it at all," he continued. He swallowed. "My mother left us when I was seven. I hardly remember her, but when I read it, I knew they were her words, her wishes. She told me to choose for myself and I'd love to introduce you my betrothed."

Hiccup reached out a hand from under the blankets and gestured to Astrid proudly. "Astrid was that choice for me."

"Slattern!" an angry voice sneered from the back. Hiccup jumped and Stoick had a hand on the hilt of his great sword. Barb elbowed her way through the crowd with her posse ducking nervously. "Slut! Whore!"

Hiccup stepped in front of Astrid, suddenly very protective and

livid. Astrid tried to shove by to give Barb a piece of her mind â€“ or a fist to the mouth more likely â€“ but Hiccup held firm. The last thing he wanted was a fight. He stared at Barb who glared at him.

"That was unnecessary," Stoick barked to Barb's family and clan. "Show some grace."

"_She_ never did!" Barb seethed. "I've sniffed about, I've heard about this yak! They say she was taken already, taken and impure and whorified and spoiled!"

Astrid shook with anger and disgust at that. Hiccup shuddered down his spine at the thought of that scenario.

"You can't marry someone who is unspoiled, my dad says so!" Barb shrieked.

"I'm no more spoiled than you are!" Astrid yelled back. The crowd gasped loudly and Barb's father stepped forward in offense. "I wish I meant that in the worst possible way, but I have never been touched!"

"Oh yeah?!" Barb screamed. "I heard some of your matrons muttering about and saying they were as confused as I am because they had to fix you up, put everything back together!"

Astrid fumed and looked at Hiccup. She squeezed her eyes shut and took a deep breath and asked Hiccup to step aside as politely as possible. She faced Barb from the top of the platform. Hiccup had the memory of her shuddering in the cove, blood on the ground, her face twisted in a pain that was consensual and possibly regretted. He shook his head of the image.

"When I was fifteen," Astrid announced to the hall, "my parents told me I was to be married off. No love, no knowledge. And I didn't want to be sold off like livestock off a boat simply to better my family's finances and to breed some children. I wanted freedom. So I took a knife and freed myself. Because I wanted to fly dragons and fight armies and run wild rather than primp and preen and pray that some random boy would have my name on a piece of parchment."

Barb almost responded but then clamped her mouth shut. She glared. "So you did it to yourself? Because you didn't want to get married?"

"It may not make sense to anyone, but yes. I didn't want to marry anyone. So I made sure no one would want me."

"But he does!" Barb cried, thrusting a fat finger at Hiccup.

"I knew Astrid did this to herself," Hiccup said strongly. Stoick looked over and the matrons all sucked back and tittered to each other as if everything suddenly made sense. "I'm sorry I didn't pick you, Barb, but in all honesty, you deserve someone who knows your interests."

Barb's chin quivered before she spun away, huffing and shoving past her father to get to the sheep meat roasting over another fire. Astrid understood that feeling â€“ when in humiliated sadness, eat a

lot of meat. Astrid looked over to Hiccup and gave him a small smile before Cauli, the huge girl with the temper, stepped forward.

"I don't like this," she said harshly, "that we take the word from a dead woman over some good ol' tradition!"

Stoick stepped forward with his hand on his hilt. "Watch it, Cauli. That dead woman happens to be my wife!"

"I don't see any wife standing up there making the calls!"

Hiccup raised his hands in defense but Astrid placed a hand on his shoulder. She pulled him back sternly and threw the blanket off her damp body, revealing her dirty dress and a trembling posture. The anger, the rage bubbling up inside her breast, Astrid defended Hiccup's mother as fiercely as her own. The casualties of Berk were sacred, and to tramp upon them was disgusting. She looked down at Cauli.

"What would make our honoured guests content?" Astrid asked threateningly. Hiccup knew whenever Astrid used formal language, she was readying herself for a fight. He sunk into his shoulders.

Cauli smiled, showing her crooked teeth. "I want to see you earn your place next to him."

"None of that!" Hiccup growled. "My betrothal needs no more proving than my choice!"

Astrid looked at him with a look that clearly said 'shut the hell up before I shove my fist so far down your throat, you won't be hungry for a moon cycle'. She looked back to Cauli, who had a wide berth around her. Even Stoick was reluctant to reject her reasonable request for a Viking-like preposition. "A fight? Would that make you happy?"

"Depends on the terms," Cauli snorted. She spat on the ground and pulled her great sword forward. "First, if I beat you, I get his hand, his titles, and his land."

Hiccup groaned and Astrid thought for a moment. "Is that all? When you say 'first', I assume there's more."

Cauli smiled. "And your dragon."

Astrid immediately straightened her back and clenched her fists. There was a roar from Berk's Vikings; a bond between a dragon and their rider was sacred, spiritual and individual. Among the noise was Hiccup, looking to his father to call off the challenge.

"You can't do that, Cauli! A dragon isn't something you can trade!" Hiccup yelled. Cauli shrugged and stared at Astrid.

"If you win, I will pledge my allegiance to Berk, to serve and fight with my armies if you need it, to renew our treaties with Berk to solidify them until the end of time. Consider it a wedding gift."

There was a tense silence as Astrid glared, furious at the intrusive taunts of Cauli's snarky mouth.

"Seems fair," Astrid mumbled, unamused. There was a murmur among the Vikings, and Cauli's father even receded to pure intrigue. Hiccup bit his lip and watched Astrid's shivering body tower over Cauli's from the platform.

"I'll make it even fairer," she said with a harsh laugh. "You can have someone fight with you."

Astrid sucked in a breath as Cauli reached out and grabbed Rose by the collar and thrust her forward. She cried out and Hiccup gasped. The room vibrated with retorts as Rose skittered to halt before Astrid. Astrid looked down at her with a sickened expression.

"She's a child!" Astrid growled.

"Don't care. Use her. She's annoyingly quiet."

Rose looked up at Astrid, eyes wide. Astrid looked from her to Cauli and back again before stepping down the platform, standing in front of Rose, and tilted her chin up strongly. Gods, she was beautiful.

"Please tell me you're not as innocent as you look," Astrid muttered to Rose's pretty face. Rose blinked, but to Astrid's surprise, Rose straightened her shoulders and gave a nod. Suddenly, Cauli hurled herself for the pair of them, sword raised. Astrid shoved Rose back and ducked as the blade soared over her head. Hiccup cried out along with hundreds of others. Astrid rolled to her feet.

"What about weapons?" she yelled.

"Guess you don't have any!" Cauli cackled. She charged again and Astrid jumped out of the way. Stoick grabbed onto Hiccup and pulled him back.

"Let them fight," Stoick growled to his struggling son.

"I need to stop this!" Hiccup sneered.

"To do so risks war. And Cauli's people have the soldiers."

Suddenly, Cauli turned to Rose, who was pulling herself off the ground. Her rosy cheek had been scraped on the stone, her green eyes wide with observant fear. Her dark hair fell in front of her face as she scrambled to her feet. Astrid ran to Cauli, but she was ready and elbowed Astrid out of the way, knocking her into a beam with a loud crack. Astrid hit the floor hard as Cauli ran for Rose. But instead of running, Rose grabbed her belt that cinched her skirts and tore the buckle free. Hiccup struggled against his father as Cauli raised her blade.

Rose pulled the belt free and attached to it were her skirts, leaving behind a pair of leather pants. She billowed her skirts forward and threw them over Cauli, using the belt to secure it around Cauli's arms. Blinded, Cauli flung herself around as Rose ran to a beam, kicked off it, and landed on Cauli. She dug her fingers into her enemy's face and crossed her legs so Cauli wouldn't throw her off. Astrid leapt to her feet. She cringed and she couldn't stand up

straight. Broken ribs? She wasn't sure. But she knew that she had one weapon, and that was Rose.

Astrid ran to Cauli and avoided her swinging sword. Rose screamed as her body was wrenched back and forth, but amazingly enough, she stayed on. She pulled back on Cauli's head and the huge woman lost her footing, helped by Astrid kicking her feet from under her. Rose wriggled out of the way and rolled over the ground, landing on her feet briskly. Astrid threw herself to Cauli's hand and stomped on her wrist until her sword came free. She grabbed the sword and thrust it under her throat. Cauli sneered and glared at Astrid.

"I win," Astrid panted. "So sod off."

Cauli's frown transformed into hearty laughter. "Finally. That was entertaining. I adhere to my terms. Now get off me."

Astrid stumbled back and Rose jumped off limberly. She skittered to her skirts and buckled them around her waist again, trying to be unnoticed. But of course, many eyes were on the girl that seemed so quiet and innocent. Astrid gave her a nod as she stumbled up the ramp. Hiccup grabbed her and noticed her grimace.

"Are you alright?" Hiccup breathed. But Astrid wrapped her arms around Hiccup's neck and kissed him deeply, breathing in his scent and getting a huge response from the crowd. Hiccup reminded himself to breathe. Astrid very rarely started a romantic action — sometimes a kiss after a punch that was quick and to the point — but this was far from that. She pulled away and turned to the crowd once more.

"Let that be proof in itself. I want no more games, no more challenges. I want a wedding."

And a wedding we shall have!" Stoick boomed. He clasped Hiccup and Astrid and smiled to the Great Hall. The next thing they knew, they were being surrounded by everyone, the platform creaking under the weight of hundreds of Vikings.

"I told you it was about time!" Tuffnut sneered, elbowing Ruffnut out of the way. Fishlegs laughed and shook Hiccup's arm, threatening to break it with his massive strength. But it was Toothless who jumped through everyone, barreling into Hiccup and licking his face, leaping off, and crashing into Astrid. Rose jumped out of the way, dabbing at her face, smiling thoughtfully at how Toothless licked Hiccup over and over. She cocked a head to the side before Toothless wrenched his massive head around and cantered over to Rose herself, sniffing at her skirts and looking at her curiously. Rose giggled and patted his nose gently.

Toothless dove in to smell her more, sniffing about the floor and chortling deep in his throat. She was pressed against a pillar. Astrid stared and felt her gut clench, but before she could alert Hiccup to the oddity, Toothless was finished exploring and jumped through the crowd to an open barrel of smelly, delectable fish. Astrid glared at Rose before Hiccup grabbed her hand.

"I know it's customary," Hiccup yelled over the loud voices, "that the bride be taken in by the elders to prepare her for what I'm sure will be a wonderful wedding — at least, I certainly hope so; it's

my wedding â€“ but I have one thing to say before that happens!"

Hiccup looked to Stoick proudly and entwined his long fingers into Astrid's calloused hand. He looked at her and gave her hand a hard squeeze.

"Before you take her from me, before we begin the purity period, I'd like to sayâ€¦ RUN!"

Hiccup leapt off the platform with Astrid in tow and barreled out the door. Ruffnut and Tuffnut, Snotlout and Fishlegs, all caught on and shoved Vikings out of the way so they could smash through the door. The other Vikings â€“ the men who would care for Hiccup and the women who would care for Astrid â€“ all yelled in happy protest and pursued them. It was a fairly new tradition for the bride and groom to run off and be chased by the villagers and guests.

Astrid felt the cold air fly through her as the two of them slipped and stumbled their way down the hill from the Great Hall into the village. It was no longer raining, thankfully. If there was one thing the two were equally good at, it was running. So they ran, giddy and cold and excited, breathless and overwhelmed by the night. They heard people behind them and Hiccup ran through the smithy, over the anvil and to Astrid's house. They ran in and Hiccup shut the door. Astrid shivered as he shoved a cupboard in front of it. He spun around to see her, soaked and pale and with a huge smile on her face.

"They're going to look here, you troll," Astrid chattered.

"Don't talk, just get into something dry," Hiccup begged happily. Astrid paled further and looked at her dress.

"You meanâ€¦ just take it off?" She looked up at him shyly, colour returning to her face.

Hiccup paled harsher than her and gulped. "Oh. Oh, no. I didn't mean that."

Astrid cracked into a small smile. "You're freaking out."

"I don't want to freak you out," Hiccup stammered. "I didn't want you to take off your clothing in front of me, I mean, I just want you to be comfortable."

"Would you be comfortable if I took off my dress?" Astrid asked innocently with a hint of mischief.

Hiccup swayed and rubbed his forehead. "I'mâ€¦ uhâ€¦ noâ€¦ not that you're notâ€¦ wellâ€¦ I justâ€¦ everything sort of happened all at once and while I can't believe it worked out the way it didâ€¦ Iâ€¦ I'm still notâ€¦"

Astrid nodded slowly. "It's something to get used toâ€¦ the wholeâ€¦ idea."

"Yeah," Hiccup replied. "I meanâ€¦ we sort of have expectations now. To, you knowâ€¦"

Astrid widened her eyes and straightened her posture. "Oh. Right."

That."

"But not right now!" Hiccup stammered. But Astrid couldn't help but think about it. The way his longish hair began to poke up as it dried, the way his green eyes looked so concerned, how she could see his skin through his soaked shirt and how lanky and lean he was from dragon riding, how his prosthetic leg broke the silence with a tiny squeak, how kissing him made her feel, the idea of letting him take off her dress and kissing her neck â€"

Suddenly, a loud bang knocked Astrid out of her warm reverie. She whirled around and snatched a fur cloak from her chair and grabbed Hiccup's hand. They bounded up the steps to Astrid's room where the dragon door was. Stormfly reared her massive head and Astrid called to her.

She climbed onto Stormfly's back and hauled Hiccup up behind her. Stormfly jumped out of the door and onto the roof. The house was surrounded and the Nadder shot into the sky. Stormfly ran off the roof and sliced into the sky, Astrid and Hiccup holding onto her as she raced away from the village.

"It will take them some time to get their dragons up," Astrid called over the wind. "Where to?"

"The sea stacks. I don't want to fly Stormfly too much. I want her to be okay with her wing."

They flew in silence, piercing the sky only with the sound of Stormfly's beating wings and purring. They circled around the island in the cover of the thick clouds and eventually touched gently on the mossy top of a great sea stack, scarred from hundreds of years of dragon claws begin sharpened on the rocky surface, smooth from the harsh weather. Hiccup slid down and helped Astrid. She grunted quietly and held her side for a moment.

"She was a dirty fighter," she muttered simply, but she relaxed when she felt that her ribs were intact. Hiccup held her hand and led her to the edge of the sea stack. He sat down and stared at the clouds parting, showing off the huge moon. They sat for what seemed like an eternity, but they enjoyed every minute of it. It was quiet up here, it was calm. Hiccup reached over and grabbed Astrid's hand. He pulled her close and they kept looking at the sky, wrapped in her one fur cloak, wet and stiff but content.

Soon, they could see stars. Tiny spatters of twinkling jewels came out in the velvet sky and Astrid curled up close. "What are you thinking about?" she murmured as gentle as a feather brush. Hiccup breathed deeply and held onto her.

"My mum," he said quietly. Astrid nodded against his cheek and traced her gaze over the constellations.

"Do you think they'd be happy?" Astrid asked. "With us?"

Hiccup took a moment. "They were great friends, I'm told," he replied.

"Do you think they're watching us?"

Hiccup nuzzled Astrid and breathed in her scent. "I hope soâ€| butâ€| it's weird."

"Hmm?"

"I feel likeâ€|" Hiccup hesitated and swallowed. "I feel likeâ€| she's out there. She's somewhere out there looking for me."

His body gave a harsh shake and Astrid felt her cheek get wet. She looked up and saw Hiccup crying, expressionless and silent, as he ran his fingers through her drying hair. She sat up and cupped his face and forced him to look at her.

"Heyâ€|"

Hiccup blinked and looked at her fondly. He smiled, making another tear fall down his raised cheek. "Yes?"

She smiled in the moonlight and didn't let herself think. "She is out there, Hiccup. She up there in the clouds, in the sky. She's the air under our dragons and the warm breeze that makes us shiver. She's out there and so is mine. They're together, our parents, and they're going to watch us marry and when it rains, it'll be because they're crying of happiness."

Hiccup sniffed and squeezed her. "Are you upset that it's me?"

Astrid blinked and squinted in confusion. "What?"

"Do you want to do this? With me, as I am, with all my flaws?"

She gave his face a squeeze and smirked. "I'm the only one who can tolerate you, I think. I think it's a perfect arrangement. And if I change my mind, I can just beat you until I am satisfied."

Hiccup chuckled and kissed her forehead gently. "Deal."

"You knowâ€|" Astrid said sleepily, "â€|I'm happy. I'm really happy. I'm the happiest I've been in so long and it's not because I had to fight someone. It's because someone chose me instead."

"I aim to impress," Hiccup replied. Astrid grinned and kissed him softly on his cold lips. He pressed into her with caution, kissing her and enjoying the feeling of her lips and nose on his cold skin. And they kept kissing quietly and gently until the others found them and separated them in preparation for their big day.

8. Knives

I tried to have this up last night but my day was just too busy. Thank you to my new followers and those who continually support me and my story. I save every one of them and they always make me happy. Enjoy!_

* * *

><p>Chapter Eight: Knives

It had been three weeks since the marriage announcement, and Berk was busier than trader Johann around Snoggletog. Astrid was in Gothi's home at the top of one of the hills watching her first of seven baths fill as the matrons poured buckets and buckets of boiled water into the stone tub. Flower petals to symbolize maidenhood and virtue were scattered over it and oils from about a hundred vials made the water smell beautiful and strong.

Astrid was in a robe, and felt uncomfortable as she huddled in what felt like a spider web for an article of clothing. For the past three weeks, she was not allowed to leave to see Hiccup or anyone for that matter or speak of Hiccup, or even sleep alone lest adult thought plague her dreams and make her act with her own means. It frustrated her and made her cranky rather than relaxed.

And to make matters worse, she would be examined today. After her bath with the matrons, Gothi would lay her down and make sure she was ready for her husband, to make sure she was intact. The thought made Astrid gulp out of angry nausea. She wouldn't pass the test, she thought. She wasn't sure what would happen if she didn't, but she didn't want to think about what she did to avoid marriage. She was glad she did because it kept her for Hiccup, but at the same time, it was proving to be quite the issue.

The matrons pulled off her robe for her, leaving it hanging off her hips. She forced herself to refrain from punching one in the breast out of sheer annoyance and angst, knowing it would hurt more, and instead used her arms to cover her chest. Juniper, one of the matrons caring for her and Snowdrop on the side (who was staying with them as well and couldn't wait to make Hiccup her brother), grabbed Astrid's wrists gently.

"You must be proud of the gifts Freya has bestowed upon you. You must be willing to show them to your lover."

"You're not my lover," Astrid grumbled. Juniper sighed and smiled.

"Don't be afraid, I have them too. Come now, put down your arms."

It took a great deal of hateful determination, but eventually, Astrid dropped her arms and looked away as Juniper looked at her chest. She nodded once and smiled up at Astrid.

"They're lovely. That wasn't so hard, was it?"

Astrid huffed.

"I need you to take off the rest of the robe, child," Juniper said gently. Astrid looked down at the furry robe hanging there pathetically and didn't move for a time. But Juniper was patient. Astrid shakily untied the robe and let it fall. She squeezed her eyes as Juniper and some other matrons looked at her hips. They murmured to each other and Juniper smiled again.

"Not the widest hips, but they'll do just fine."

"My hips?" Astrid asked quietly. "What?"

"Wide hips means you could bear many children."

Astrid gasped, a sound caught in her throat. Juniper placed a calming hand on her shoulder.

"All in good time, Astrid," she said. "For now, bath."

"No, no no no, children?!" Astrid stammered. Juniper rested her hand on Astrid's back and smiled again.

"All in good time," was the repeated reply.

Juniper helped Astrid get into the tub. It was scalding, a feeling unfamiliar to her and very satisfying. It took her some time to get used to the way it hurt, but she soon let herself sit and slouch. Matrons washed her back, her arms, her shoulders.

"What do I do?" Astrid asked suddenly, looking for Juniper who was meticulously washing her hair.

"Hmm?" Juniper looked down at her with raised eyebrows and a calm mouth. Astrid sighed jaggedly.

"What do I do with him?"

Juniper smiled and leaned back. A giggle washed through the matrons.

"You bed him, sweeting."

Astrid squirmed but felt herself melting into the tub. "But how? What should I do? What should I expect?"

"Your mother never told you?" Juniper asked gently.

Astrid shook her head.

Juniper put more oil into Astrid's hair and breathed in the scent. "It will hurt. Tarnished or not, even by your own hand, it will hurt. You will feel full and maybe a little overwhelmed. It will be uncomfortable after that first painful moment, but that is normal."

Astrid nodded, feeling hotter in the water.

"You will need to get him to touch you first. That will make you ready for him. Freya will make it so. And when you are ready, lay down and relax and let it happen. It's a dance, an interaction that takes care and tenderness. But it is natural, and you will know what to do. Kiss his neck, his ear, rub his skin. Us Vikings are used to having our bodies covered. Expose the skin and touch it and you will have a happy husband."

Husband. Astrid shivered at the word and she let herself doze off as her body was cleaned thoroughly. This would happen for the next seven days and it was something she surprisingly looked forward to. She peeled open her eyes and looked over to a matron.

"Who is with Snowdrop?" she asked.

"The younger matrons and some of Berk's visitors," was the

replied.

"Send one with Snowdrop to the Academy. They are having a game there that I cannot attend. But Snowdrop won't shut up about it."

* * *

><p>Hiccup clapped in the arena as Vikings took turns firing arrows into makeshift bull's-eyes. It was a hilarious affair where frustrated and bulky Vikings tried to be accurate and instead missed the target with an appalling majesty. But he couldn't stop thinking about Astrid. It used to be that he would sometimes think about her, but these days, now that he was not allowed to say her name or sleep alone to keep himself from unvirtuous activities, he couldn't help but constantly think of her. There had been times when he almost walked into her path and a posse of watchmen formed from all the male villagers and visitors shoved a potato sack over his head to hide his eyes.</p>

"You look unwell, my boy," Stoick said.

"I didn't get any sleep last night," Hiccup groaned. "Toothless ran off to chase some of the visitors hunting in the woods or something and he disappeared. I couldn't find him until sunrise."

The competition was in high-spirits before Stoick leaned over from his throne, his cheeks a bit redder than usual.

"Sonâ€¦ in one week you'll be married."

"I'm glad you haven't forgotten," Hiccup retorted humourously.

"Have the men talked to you, yet?" he asked gruffly.

"All I've heard is talk from men," Hiccup groaned.

"About your wedding night?"

Hiccup straightened his posture and flung his head around to look at Stoick.

"Alright, dad, uh, no but I'm sure, uh â€""

"I want you to be ready," Stoick replied, just as flustered and uncomfortable as his son. The pair of them kept clapping at the target competition, their faces forced with the most awkward of smiles to keep an air of interest about them. "Do you know what to do?"

"It's not like I've ever tried it before," Hiccup said through gritted teeth. "Can we talk about this later? Like, seventy-three years from now?"

"I'm not expecting you to start off having children immediately."

"That's not the point!" Hiccup wheezed.

"You're going to have be gentle."

"Gods, oh no."

Hiccup rubbed a hand over his eyes, his face on fire.

"I assume you take matters into your own hands, so to speak."

"Thor, save me from this torment."

"It's kind of like that, onlyâ€| with Astrid."

"Stop."

"And if you don't want to have a child, simply bite your tongue and pull out and â€""

"Aaand that's about as much as I can take!" Hiccup jumped from his seat and stepped away sheepishly. "Look, I know you're trying to be my dad right now, but I want to figure this out without the awkward talks about my body, let alone Astrid's."

Stoick's shoulders sank and a huge sigh flowed from his mouth. "Thank Odin, that was rough. Never again."

"HUP!" a tiny voice shrieked. Hiccup swiveled around and saw Snowdrop barreling towards him. She leapt into his arms and he lifted her up, hugging her fondly. Stoick smiled warmly at the sight. Hiccup pulled away and set Snowdrop down. Rose was behind him, scratching her arm and looking into the arena at the target practice.

"How's my Terrible Terror?" Hiccup asked. Snowdrop beamed.

"I'm good, Rose brought me to see the knives and I really wanted to see you and Astrid is having a bath!"

Hiccup blinked and coughed. "That sounds like fun," he chirped, trying to think cold thoughts.

Rose placed a hand on Snowdrop's head. "Now, Snowdrop, we are not allowed to talk about your sister in front of Hiccup."

"Oopsâ€|"

"It's okay," Rose laughed. "Would you like to sit with Stoick for the knife-throwing?"

"Okay!"

Snowdrop stumbled over to the throne Hiccup was previously sitting on and clambered up it. Hiccup looked over at Rose, heat poking at his face.

"You gave her my seat," Hiccup joked.

"It was the polite thing to do. It's custom from where I come from to offer your seat to the young."

"And where is that?" Hiccup asked. "Where is it you come from?"

"North," Rose replied. "A small island."

"Sounds lonely."

"Only because you are lonely, dragon master," Rose smiled. "I heard you were running around last night hunting a dragon that is impossible to hunt during the night."

"â€|Oh?"

"The matrons were telling me," Rose giggled. "Did you find him?"

"He was at home," Hiccup sighed. "Stupid dragon bit his own tongue open in all the excitement, but it's not the first time that's happened. One big happy dragon and one tired rider."

"Hiccup!" Snotlout called from inside the arena. "Come throw some knives!"

Hiccup raised his hands. "I watch these things, I don't compete in them."

Rose raised an eyebrow and looked to Snotlout, who had two knives in his hands. Snotlout pointed at her with a blade.

"What about you, gorgeous? Wanna toss some metal?"

Rose bit her lip and looked to Hiccup. "Oh, I don't think that's a good idea â€""

"Now I'm intrigued!" Snotlout laughed. "Come on!"

Rose rolled her eyes and looked at Hiccup. "Come with me," she asked dejectedly. Hiccup sighed and shrugged, ducked under the arena's chain roof, and landed in the arena. He backed up and spotted Rose as she jumped down on her feet lightly, shyly approaching the men who all had different knives. Hiccup hooked his thumbs in his riding suit and watched Rose carefully pull a throwing knife from the weapon's wagon, look at it, and looked to Snotlout.

Meanwhile, Hiccup felt hands grab onto his arms. Two huge men sportingly pulled his figure to the targets, tying him to a target. He squirmed and heard his father laugh. Hiccup growled. Berk's groom tradition: target practice with the man. The men backed up as Rose weighed the knife in her hand.

"A test of bravery, my boy!" Stoick bellowed. Don't worry, it'll be fun."

Hiccup pulled against the rope. "Great. One week before my wedding and you use me as a target!"

Rose timidly raised the dagger and looked terribly nervous and excited. "Don't worry, I'm a lousy shot!"

Hiccup choked and his eyes bulged out of his head. "OH. AWESOME."

She flung the knife and it twirled through the air. It didn't even hit the target, but that didn't stop Hiccup from clenching every part

of his body. It hit the stone wall far from Hiccup. Hiccup relaxed a little, but Rose had another knife in her hand. She flung it again and it didn't do anything. She got one more knife and smirked.

"Practice shots," she said simply. "I'm warming up."

"By all means, take as long as you need while I sit here tied to a board praying that I'm not going to be killed a week before my wedding."

Rose inspected the blade of her knife closely, looking up at Hiccup. "You have to keep completely still."

Hiccup rolled his eyes. "I'm sorta tied to a target. If I could move, I would."

"I'm being serious, you can't move. I'm going to aim right for your face."

Hiccup blanched. "You know, you're a lot more menacing than you appear to be."

Rose smiled mischievously. "I get that from my mother."

Faster than any other time, quicker than a snake attacks its prey, Rose hurled the dagger at Hiccup. He gasped and the knife hit the board with a loud thunk. He felt a sting and froze. The knife had barely hit his neck. The blade had cut his skin ever so lightly, and Rose smiled again. The men in the arena clapped wildly as Rose ran to Hiccup. She pulled the knife from the board and touched his neck gently, giggling at the look on Hiccup's face.

"Reeeeelax! You're fine," she smiled casually. She untied him and he sank to his knees, grabbing at his neck and glaring. Rose just shrugged. "I'm heading back to the matrons."

Hiccup was about to protest, to give her a piece of his mind, how the knife got too close, when Rose bent over and whispered in his ear. "She looks very beautiful in a bath."

And she ran off, leaving Hiccup with a small cut on his neck and a roaring heat in his ears.

* * *

><p>Astrid breathed deeply. She entered Gothi's room with her shoulders back as she had been told to, her fur robe back over her naked body. She was told she would enter alone.</p>

Gothi, the tiny and old elder, smiled at Astrid and motioned for her to sit on the sleeping mat in front of her. Astrid did so and felt nervous. Would she pass the test? She did not know.

"Astrid!" Gothi tasted the name on her lips. Astrid felt her breath catch in her throat. She looked up, bewildered. Gothi never talked. It just never happened. She thought she physically couldn't talk until now.

"Surprised? Most maidens are. Before a woman is wed, we bathe her.

Then I have the honour of making sure they are ready for their new life. It is a ceremony that takes the most trust and care for a young woman before her first bedding. But, if I remember correctly, this is not the first time I have had to check you."

"â€| No."

"And why is that?" Gothi asked with genuine curiosity. "I have heard many stories..."

Astrid swallowed and took her time replying. "Becauseâ€| five years ago, in response to a marriage contract, I took my own purity and I needed your hands to heal me."

Gothi nodded thoughtfully. Her withered face contorted into a gentle smile. "A very apt response, my dear. And you did a very good job of it. But as you know, a knife is not a man."

Astrid was quiet. Gothi motioned for her to lie down. She did so. Gothi sat at her knees and placed two withered hands on them. She gently parted them and stared.

It seemed like millions of years before she closed them and closed her eyes.

"It is hard to believe that I birthed you from your mother so many years ago," she sighed. "A beautiful child with one of the loudest voices I had ever heardâ€| But that has never changed, has it?"

Astrid cracked a grin. "Do you know why you never married that other man?"

The question was out of nowhere. Astrid sat up, confused.
"Why?"

"Because it was not meant to be. In other circumstances, I would have healed you and made sure your contract was honoured, but in this case, I saw another path for you. The gods showed me. And look at us now."

Astrid was quiet again.

"You will make a wonderful wife," Gothi said. "I know you may think yourself arrogant and blunt, but child, you have graciousness and tenderness about you that most women lack. Remember that. You have passed your test, you have not felt the touch of a man. I hope that when you do, it will be what you hoped."

"What of the damage I did?" Astrid asked, scared.

"That should not matter. You have adapted to the life you have given yourself. If you have enough trust for your husband, a bond formed through the harshest wars and the largest advances, then you will have nothing to fear. He is not someone you can live with. He is someone you cannot live without."

Hello, and Happy Friday! Thank you to all my followers and favourites, and especially to those who took the time to review. I love hearing how you think the story will evolve. :) Also, I've been working on fan art. If you have a scene you would like to see drawn, let me know! I am craving inspiration. 3

* * *

><p>Chapter Nine: Heat

Hiccup couldn't sleep. He stared at the ceiling of the Great Hall, his home for the past month, tapping his fingers on his other hand. A few of the men were talking by the fire, all posted to make sure Hiccup slept and nothing more. They guarded him from himself, and that made Hiccup both uncomfortable and unreasonably frustrated. He kept staring at the rafters, counting the wooden foundation rafters over and over (forty-four, front to back) and he looked over at Toothless who was just as awake.

"Hey, bud," he murmured gently, scratching his neck. Toothless' eyes flicked over sharply. He was on edge, not being allowed to fly for an entire moon, his wings cramped from staying unused for so long. Supervised walks were okay, but flying was too risky. Hiccup could not be let out of sight, lest he run into his bride or go to some quiet corner to relieve himself from a buildup of angst.

Toothless groaned as Hiccup sat up, patting his head and smiling. He grabbed his dragon's mouth gingerly and opened it, looking at his tongue. "Tongue all healed up," he sighed. "Gods, it's so hot in here."

He kicked off his blankets and the men turned to see him.

"Ho there, Hiccup! Can't sleep?" Fishlegs laughed. "Excited for the big day tomorrow?"

"I guess you could say that," Hiccup muttered. To be honest, Hiccup was anxious. It had been a month since seeing Astrid's face, since kissing her on the sea stack, and it made him ache. He had never felt that, and his dreams were plagued by thoughts that made behaving too difficult to bear. He was scared that she wouldn't be there, too. That she would change her mind and forget about him. He shook his head and stood up.

"I need some fresh air," Hiccup said. "It's too warm in here."

"Is _that_ what you call it?" Tuffnut asked with a snort.

"Please," Hiccup groaned, annoyed. "Toothless needs to stretch his wings and I need a minute."

"No can do," Fishlegs sighed. "We have the sworn duty to make sure that nothing goes awry before your wedding."

Hiccup dug the palms of his hands into his eye sockets.
"Seriously?"

"Did we stutter?" Tuffnut asked with a raised eyebrow.
"Nope."

Hiccup groaned and Toothless' teeth emerged from his gums. He snarled and Hiccup placed a hand on his head. He smiled and rolled his eyes.

"Oh, what do we have here? An angry Night Fury with a wing cramp?"

Hiccup gave Toothless a subtle wave, a command. Toothless shrieked and leapt forward, fanning out his wings in front of Hiccup. He clipped his foot into the saddle.

Fishlegs and Tuffnut both cried out in terror and jumped to the side. Toothless bounded out the door and Hiccup finally felt the relief of the night air on his skin, and more importantly, the loneliness of the wind on his face.

"Come on, bud, let's make up for lost time!" Hiccup whooped. Toothless let his tongue hang out as they shot through the air, faster than a catapult's thrust. They soared around the island, drinking in the air and staying hidden in the darkness. Oh, to be alone. Hiccup felt all the pressure of the month collect in his gut, deep and low and hungry. He felt his eyelashes flutter and he focussed on other things. Free or no, he would honour Astrid by not breaking that rule.

He hauled Toothless into the air, screaming into the wind, letting his voice crack. He could barely feel the cold on his skin. Toothless dove and the two spun out of control, the rush so wonderful and yearned for that the pair became exhausted very quickly.

They came to a hover, gliding over the trees of Berk, the two of them panting and sore.

"Take me to the cove, bud. I need a drink."

He let Toothless fly them there, moving his foot when he needed to, but keeping his focus on the sky above him. Finally, they landed in the familiar bowl in the earth. Toothless began drinking in the lake before Hiccup dismounted, cupped some water in his hands, and drank. He drank and drank for what seemed like forever before he turned and found Toothless hanging upside down, sleeping gently in the soft wind. Hiccup smiled and sighed. To see Toothless finally sleeping was nice to see.

Hiccup decided to walk back. He knew Toothless had a way out of the cove â€“ he had constructed a ladder of sorts for him to get out years before â€“ and casually walked through the woods.

He realized he was by himself, completely alone. He slowed his pace and licked his lips, eyebrows furrowed.

"Astrid."

He let her name flow over his tongue, the first time in weeks, savouring the sound and feel of it. He smiled and said it once more, quickening his pace. He was marrying Astrid in the morning. He would feast and dance and say her name as many times as he could and then when the sun set, they would be totally alone â€“

He felt a blinding pain in his shoulder blades, the wind knocked out

of his lungs. He fell to the ground and groaned. He heard a gasp and feet skittering over the crunchy earth.

"_Hiccup_?!" a familiar voice hissed. Hiccup's head jerked upwards. He saw a figure cloaked in shadow, bright blue eyes illuminated by a tiny beam of moonlight. Astrid flung herself behind a tree as Hiccup made it to his feet. He ran to the tree. "Don't come any closer!"

Hiccup froze, on the other side of the tree, his hand on the bark.

"You hit me," he panted.

"I thought you were someone else," she spat.

"Has a moon made you forget me?" he asked.

"No, of course not. What in Thor's name are you doing out here?"

Hiccup bonked his head on the trunk, closing his eyes and trying his hardest to stay on his side of the tree. "I needed to be alone. I couldn't take it, I can't sleep and Toothless needed to be flown."

Astrid took a moment. "Ah. A minute alone."

Hiccup's eyes flew open. "No, no no no, not for that, I swear â€œ"

"Uh huh."

"Seriously!"

"Sure."

"Astrid, I'm telling the truth!"

"We're getting married tomorrow," she breathed. She took another loud breath. "â€œ| Iâ€œ| I think it just hit me."

"Astrid?"

He heard her body slide down the tree. He almost moved around the tree before he heard her breathe again.

"Godsâ€œ| I'm marrying you tomorrow."

"Is that a problem?" he asked carefully. "Because if it isâ€œ|"

"Noâ€œ| it's wonderful. But godsâ€œ|"

Hiccup nodded and sat down on the other side of the tree. He hugged his knees and rested his chin on his arms. "Yeahâ€œ| it's kinda weird to think about, eh?"

"You know about tomorrow night?" she asked timidly.

"My dad tried to explain it to me."

"Sweet Odin."

"Yup."

"â€|Are you scared?"

Hiccup bit his lip. "By the fact that my knowledge is based on a conversation my dad tried to have with me in the middle of a knife-throwing competition where I became a target? Yeah."

Astrid laughed. Then she was quiet again. "I think I am, too."

"Hah. Astrid Hofferson, afraid?"

"It's not like I've done it before," she sneered.

"Hey, I haven't either. Remember, Stoick the Vast trying to be anatomically correct with me? It didn't really work out."

"Nightmares?"

"Nightmares."

They laughed again and sighed.

"How did you get loose?" he asked Astrid.

Astrid groaned painfully. "I made it look like someone was in my bed and I snuck out the back. I'd been listening to Olga chewing her bread crusts for the past two hours. For some reason, that was the tipping point."

"Gross."

"That's an understatement."

Hiccup nodded and sighed. He heard Astrid clear her throat.

"â€|Could you do me a favour?"

"Anything."

"I've been separated from you for an entire moon. And it's been so much harder than I wanted it to be."

"So?"

He heard Astrid move. "Close your eyes."

Hiccup jumped. "What? What are you doing?"

"I'm going to close my eyes and you're going to close yours. Okay?"

Hiccup laughed again and closed his eyes. He heard rustling as Astrid moved again.

"Keep talking to me, I can't find you in the dark with my eyes closed if you stop."

Hiccup smiled and lost his breath for a moment. "Uhâ€œ| okay? My name is Hiccup, I am twenty-one winters old and â€œ|"

"Seriously? That's what you're going to say?"

"You were the one who told me to talk!"

"Couldn't you try something a bit moreâ€œ| I dunnoâ€œ| romantic?"

"Uh, I think you look good when you're filthy?"

"Do you want a fist to the face, my love?"

Hiccup laughed nervously and sucked in a breath. "Okay, okay."

There was some more rustling as Astrid made her way closer.

"I like what you said. Not the punching part, but the 'my love' part. It was nice."

Astrid scoffed. "I was being sarcastic."

Hiccup's smile fell. "You mean, you didn't mean it?"

"Well, I meant itâ€œ|"

THere was a slight pause as they reminded themselves to breathe. Hiccup leaned his head to the side, quiet.

"Were you at all freaked out when I said that I loved you?"

"Were you telling the truth?" Astrid asked. She stumbled, but she was close. Hiccup grinned and moved as silently as he could, away from where her voice was coming from.

"Yes, I was being honest," Hiccup said.

"Then why would it freak me out?"

"Because when I said it, you never said it back."

Astrid stopped for a moment. "That doesn't mean anythingâ€œ| where the hell are you?"

"You know, a wife should love her husband, and should say it," Hiccup invited playfully, backing away from the tree.

"Hiccup, you know I feel the same way, now stop moving and stand still."

"Not until you say it!" Hiccup said. He had a huge smile on his lips. "Come on, Astrid, it's not hard."

He felt hands on his riding suit, and Astrid grunted. She shoved him down onto the frosty moss and he felt her frigid hands on his burning face.

"You're warm," she sighed desperately. The cold in her fingers touching the warmth of his body made her swoon in an innocent way.

"Say it," he repeated. "Say that you love me."

"Are you wearing a cloak? It's freezing out here," Astrid shivered.

"Say it."

"Stop telling me to say it!"

"Say it."

Astrid growled and squirmed on top of him. Hiccup forced himself to keep his hands off her.

"Fine," she spat, frustrated. "It."

"Very funny," Hiccup chuckled. "It's not that hard."

"I beg to differ," she replied.

Hiccup blinked and froze and bit his tongue. He tried to move his hips away from her, but that made it worse. "Awkward."

"Yeah."

"Do you want to move?"

"No, you're warm."

"Say it."

Astrid sighed and shivered on top of him. She was freezing, like a block of ice inside a sheath of flesh. She growled. "If I do, then what?"

"I guess you'll have to find out."

Astrid shivered again. "Fine. I love you."

"I'm sorry? I couldn't hear you."

"I love you," Astrid repeated. But it sounded softer. Hiccup took a moment to let those words enter his heart, to give his stomach a whirl, and he smiled gently. "I love you."

"I love you, too."

Hiccup wrapped his arms around her and rolled them over. Astrid gasped as Hiccup pulled her cloak off.

"Hiccup, we can't â€œ"

"Don't worry, Astrid, nothing's going to happen."

Hiccup pulled the cloak over himself and rested his body lightly over

Astrid's. He buried his face in the crook of her cold neck.

"Tell me if I'm crushing you or something."

"Okay."

He let himself down, rearranging their legs so they fit together comfortably.

"You're so cold," Hiccup said, concerned.

"I can't feel my fingers," Astrid admitted.

Hiccup reached between them and unbuckled his riding suit vest, opening it at the neck. He grabbed her hand and placed it inside his suit against his chest. Her fingers were like ice, and Hiccup was too warm to care. Astrid purred and nuzzled her face into his shoulder.

"Why are you so warm?" she asked, envious to return warmth to her fingers.

"To keep you from freezing. Is it working?"

"Mhmm."

They lied there for a time, listening to a distant river rush and the sound of their deep breaths. Hiccup didn't recognize her scent. It was flowery and soothing, but her scent was still there. He couldn't explain it. But he wanted to see her face. He resisted the urge to lift himself up and peer down at her, but when he heard her snore softly against his shoulder, he couldn't help it.

He gently lifted himself up and looked at her with his tired eyes. Her face was rosy, her lips pink and warm from their body heat. One hand was curled over her chest, the other still tucked against his chest. Her fingers twitched against his skin and he blinked. She was so beautiful when she slept. He smiled and lied next her, putting an arm under her head and pulling her against him. He told himself to not fall asleep, to let his betrothed sleep for a few hours. She looked exhausted. He let his eyes fall shut, convincing himself that he could stay awake.

But of course, Hiccup was startled by Toothless sniffing at him, pawing at him to wake up. He peeled open his eyes and saw that Astrid was gone. And the sun was rising. He leapt to his feet and whirled around, lost and confused for a moment before Toothless barked at him. He jumped into his saddle, clutching at the ropes.

"I can't be late for my own wedding, bud!" he said worriedly. And the two of them raced back to the village.

10. The Day

Happy Thursday! A personal shoutout to greenshade15 and Zippy for making me smile this week, and to all those following this adventure.

* * *

><p>Chapter Ten: The Day

Hiccup scratched at his neck under the collar that was laced up to his chin. His loose shirt, formed to be tight around the forearms and waist, had not a single wrinkle. His leather pants hugged every part of his body. His hair had been brushed, oiled, rinsed, and brushed again. His crown was back on his head.

He pressed his fingers to his lips and swallowed. Snotlout snorted. "Feeling sick again, Hiccup?"

"Gods, I can't calm myself. I haven't been able to keep anything down."

"I was the same way with Wormha. Couldn't keep a trout down worth yak spit. Have you tried the bread?"

"I gave up food this morning. I was forced to eat a huge breakfast and I almost ruined dad's vest."

Hiccup shuddered and swallowed again. His heart was pounding as more and more villagers funnelled into the meadow that had thawed out that morning. Hours before, Hiccup had run over this meadow to get into the village, where he was snatched and scolded and lightly beaten for escaping. But he said he did not see Astrid or do anything questionable, so they focused on getting him ready for the wedding. They had tried to get him to keep eating, but Hiccup would vomit it up horrendously, living up to one of his middle names.

Stoick was giddier than a lamb, jumping to the other clan leaders and laughing with them. Hiccup was at the top of the platform, watching over everyone as Snotlout chuckled.

"You know, I was the one on her contract," he said. It was so quiet that Hiccup almost didn't hear it, but he turned and looked at him with furrowed eyebrows.

"What?"

"When Astrid was fifteen, that contract that made her go into the woods toâ€œ you knowâ€œ? That was me."

Hiccup's jaw dropped. "Are you serious?"

Snotlout smiled. "Yeah."

Hiccup felt terribly awkward. He rubbed the back of his head and looked around uncomfortably. "You wereâ€œ fond of her back then."

"Didn't stop my parents from finding someone else for me. I think it worked out for the best."

Hiccup nodded. "Do you think Wormha is better for you?"

"I'm not allowed to live otherwise," was the reply. Hiccup wasn't sure if it was a happy tone. But Snotlout smiled just the same and punched his arm. "Think you're ready?"

"I hope so."

Snotlout stepped back. "I hope so, too. Here she comes."

Hiccup tensed up everywhere and jumped so hard, he felt nauseous all over again. He saw Stoick stomp up the platform. He slapped his son on the back and rubbed his shoulders in excitement as the women began to enter the meadow. The sun shone through the clouds, parting them as Snowdrop led Astrid through the arch at the mouth of the meadow. The flower gate, or on Berk, a stone arch covered in vines and snowberries, welcomed her into the field.

The crowd parted and he finally saw her. Her hair, always in a braid but never cut, hung over her shoulders and ended somewhere around her hips. Her dress, dyed a pinky-red colour, bustled in the wind under a chest plate formed over her left breast to protect her heart. A heavy belt slung over her hips, the links in the shapes of dragon skulls. Her silver circlet was around her head and caught the sun, reflecting what felt like an angelic raindrop of blinding light straight into Hiccup's eyes. From her circlet were protrusions, spikes, that extended far into the air to look like a mighty crown, adorned with vines and leaves. She looked like a Nadder faerie queen. She looked at Hiccup and smiled as Snowdrop pulled her along, her tiny hand leading her down the pathway instead of her father.

Stormfly and Toothless reared onto their claws and roared into the cool air, piercing the sky and making the ground shake as Astrid made her way through the crowd in her magnificent crown, the vines hanging around her face with her hair. Snowdrop stopped and Gothi stepped into the path. She handed a bowl to Astrid, gently and gracefully. She ran a hand over it and the bowl lit into flame. Astrid bowed her head tearfully and Gothi shook her staff over her head.

Her path clear, Astrid strongly paced down the path with the bowl of fire in her hands, a symbol of the lives lost to her — her beloved mother and father — and the strength of the dragons who protected her, the fire within her soul and the fire behind her eyes. The symbol of the fighter.

A tear ran down her cheek as she clutched the bowl of fire and with a nail-biting ascent, she stepped up the platform. She did not step on her skirt, nor did she break her eyes from Hiccup's. She landed in front of him and she held out the fire to him. He cupped the bowl over her own hands and rested his forehead against hers.

"For my mother, for my father," Astrid whispered formally.

"For my mother," Hiccup reiterated.

They handed the bowl to Stoick, who bowed his own head, the horns on it fearsomely beautiful in the sunlight. Hiccup reminded himself to breath as he entangled his fingers with Astrid's.

"For my wife," Stoick murmured. Astrid and Hiccup squeezed each other's hands and smiled at each other. The ceremony began with a few words about Berk and its traditions, but Hiccup would never remember it. He spent that time memorizing Astrid's face, her eyes, the blue turning from azure flame into crystal ice in places. A stormy sea riddled with icebergs. Her thin lips over her filled cheeks, the single tear mark that stained her cheek.

"And for your vows," Stoick grunted. "A message to your loved one. Hiccup, you may begin."

"I, Hiccup Haddock Horrendous III, promise you everything I can give you," Hiccup began shakily, clutching onto Astrid for dear life. "My blades will protect you. My love will feed you. My heart will beat with yours. My soul will walk with yours. Astrid Sigourney Hofferson, I will be everything you had hoped for and more. If you are lost in the dark, I will be your star lighting your way back to me. If you are taken ill, I will be by your side until you wake. I vow my loyalty, my strength, my bravery, and my life to you."

Astrid stared, tears in her eyes once more.

"You are the beauty of my morning, Astrid," Hiccup said personally, deviating from the customary vows. "You are my only and my chosen. I will love you long after I am gone, after our dragons have taken flight to Valhalla and our bones are distant memories. I offer you all that I am and I will accept you for your entirety forevermore. Always and eternal."

The crowd murmured joyfully as Astrid parted her own lips, letting her tears rain down and not letting go of Hiccup's hands to clean them.

"I, Astrid Sigourney Hofferson, promise everything I can give you. My axe will protect you. My love will free you. My heart will dance with yours. My soul will love with yours. Hiccup Haddock Horrendous III, I will be your shield in battle. Your arrow in the field. Your passionate warcry in the face of our enemies. If you are stranded, I will draw you a map to find your way. I vow my determination, my courage, my rage, my love, and my life to you. You are the wonder of my world, Hiccup. You have been for so long. And now we can be together until we no longer wake. Always and eternal."

Stoick placed his hands over theirs emotionally and nodded at them. He reached into his vest.

"I have dreamt of this day for years. And to think, two moons ago, you were nearly killed by a Skrill. You saved Snowdrop, Hiccup, the sister to your beloved. I cannot think of a better arrangement than to see you continue to protect the Hoffersons. Normally, we would bestow the bride and groom with rings to unite them, to show the world of their union. Butâ€| after an unfortunate event with a ring and a dragon training mishap â€""

Snotlout snorted and flaunted his left hand, which was missing the ring finger.

"â€" we have decided against that. Six years ago, my boy destroyed the void between Vikings and dragons, killing the Red Death queen and freeing thousands of dragons from the bonds of their tyrant. Astrid and Hiccup both are the most amazing dragon riders Berk could ask for, devoted to each other and their dragons."

Stormfly and Toothless shrieked again, elated and excited. Stoick pulled two chains from his vest.

"For Hiccup, I give you a scale of Stormfly's."

Hiccup bowed his head as the chain with the bright blue scale was set around his neck. Astrid smiled gleefully and she touched it gently. Stormfly chortled and seemed to giggle.

"And for Astrid, Toothless has offered one of his scales as well."

Stoick clipped it around her neck to avoid the spikes of her mighty crown. The black stood out over her breast, beautiful and shimmery. Hiccup touched a finger to it as Toothless barked again, tongue lolling.

A hiss entered the back of Hiccup's head. He tensed his neck and gasped jarringly. "Looove_." The word made his spine crawl and his head began to ache. It echoed through his mind behind his eyes and he swayed for a moment as the word hummed and convulsed, twisted and layered and haunting beautiful.

He blinked and it was gone. Astrid was beaming up at him and he smiled back, not a single second passing. He shook it off with a roll of the shoulders and Astrid squeezed his hands again.

"And with that, I proclaim the pair of you wed, husband and wife, to ride your dragons over Berk and to sing your love high over the seas. As chief of Berk, in front of off all the witnesses gathered here today, I pronounce you married."

The meadow shook with cheering and laughter. Whoops and cries of jubilation stirred Hiccup to ecstatic tears. Overwhelmed and overjoyed, Astrid reached up and cupped Hiccup's wet face with her small hands. She laughed as she felt his cheeks flush through his smile.

"You're very warm."

Hiccup laughed and kissed her, picking her up and spinning her around. Stoick laughed and raised his hands to quiet the celebration.

"I'd also like to add something special before the gift-giving begins," Stoick grunted. The meadow hushed again as Stoick cleared his throat. "Astrid, your parents left you a few years ago. I only wish they were here to see how much you've grown into your spirit. In their honour, in the past moon that you two were separated and preoccupied, a house was erected in honour of your parents and my wife. You shall live there and raise a family there. But that leaves the question of Snowdrop."

Astrid's smile fell and she paled. Hiccup's stomach felt cold. If Hiccup and Astrid were married and in their own house, where would Snowdrop go?

"Hiccup is my only childâ€| my wife was torn from me before I could have another and how I wished I had the chance to," Stoick explained sadly. "But now that you are leaving our home to be in your own, I have decided, with Astrid's grace, take Snowdrop in as my ward, to care for her and keep her safe until she grows old enough to be on her own. I promise to give her access to all she needs to become a dragon trainer. Nothing will change, but it will give her a home and

food and hopefullyâ€œ a person to look up to her next to the father she no longer has."

Astrid's face crumbled in front of Hiccup's eyes. She let go of him to embrace Stoick, leaping into his arms and taking him completely off-guard. Hiccup chuckled through his own emotions as Snowdrop peeked out from the crowd.

"On one condition," Astrid forced. "She marries who she wants, when she wants."

"You have my word."

"Thank you," she sobbed. All Astrid had been worried about was her sister's life. Living alone without their parents had made Astrid hunt for days on end for food, to stay up countless nights to keep her sister warm, defending her from nightmares all while trying to prevent starvation. "Thank you so much."

The gift-giving provided the newlyweds with a spectrum of items for their new home. Furniture, new weapons, material to build new inventions, a drawing table from Gobber accompanied with a mini-forge, countless blankets, food, and clothing. They were thankful for the turnout and the villagers graciously transported them to the Great Hall.

After the feast and dance â€“ Hiccup had managed to down some food, but only a little as the excitement was not over â€“ the couple was escorted to their new home on a high hill overlooking the sea stacks. Hiccup lifted Astrid into his arms and carried her inside albeit protests from her to put her down. Inside, they were shocked to find a home built to the perfect detail. Besides the space outside for two dragons, the room inside could fit both riders and their dragons and even more. The mini-forge was set up by the hearth where the cooking pots were, and the drawing table was nestled in a quiet nook by the back of the house. The rest of the walls were taken up by shelves holding their new weapons and old.

Upstairs was their bed. It was huge and covered in every single fur. Another hearth burned calmly and cupboards held their clothing. A huge dragon door sliced into the roof, engulfing a huge portion of the night sky. The covering for the door was tucked away in the rafters for when it snowed. Stoick and Gobber, as well as Gothi and Juniper, were waiting behind them, smiles wide. The couple turned to smile at them, but then they panicked.

There was only one reason why two men and two women, both sets representative of Berk, were waiting for them in their bedroom. Astrid and Hiccup looked at each other, alarmed and upright.

"Ohâ€œ "

Hiccup looked at his dad.

"So, uhâ€œ "

Stoick laughed and Gobber held his gut as laughter tore through him. Gothi smiled and Juniper giggled with them.

"Look at you," Stoick gasped. "Terrified!"

Hiccup frowned and Astrid couldn't help but snort.

"Hey, it's not like I know what I'm doing, but to have you watch?"

The laughter grew louder. "My boy, we don't have to watch you. You two chose each other, I don't think it's necessary, but your face!"

Hiccup glared. "Yes, okay, thank you for that."

Everyone laughed as they left, the joke still at its peak until they were long gone.

It was just Hiccup and Astrid. They slowly turned to each other and held their breath.

"Soâ€| how are you?" he asked awkwardly. Astrid groaned and let her shoulders slump.

"This crown has been giving me a headache all day!" she began. She sat on the bed and kicked off her boots. She wriggled her toes as she tugged at her hair tangled around the crown. Hiccup sat next to her and tried to help her, but after a small argument and a lot of hair-pulling, Astrid got ensnared in the mess that was her crown and hair. Hiccup laughed and grabbed her hair, gently untangling it until he could pry the crown from her head.

She sighed as the weight was lifted and Hiccup lifted it in his hands. It was heavy. He stood up and crossed the room to set it on a cupboard. When he turned around, he found Astrid reach up behind her, clawing at something. She harrumphed and fell face down on the bed, defeated by what looked like laces that tied her in.

"This dress, Juniper bought it from trader Johann, is so tight and I hate it."

Hiccup snorted. "So?"

"I can't get out," Astrid whined hilariously. "I ate so much and danced so much and mixing that with this stupid contraption â€" ugh! Get me out."

Hiccup lifted his hands. He shook his head and climbed onto the bed, taking off his boots and untying the strings. He pulled them loose over and over until it became upon enough for Astrid to try to wriggle out of. She stood up. She bent over to try to get the dress over her head but it was hopeless when it got caught around her shoulders. She hissed and ran about the room trying to get it off, revealed her knickers in the firelight. Hiccup howled in laughter, rolling over the bed as Astrid growled.

"I'm going to kill you," Astrid threatened as she fell over to get out. Hiccup lifted her back onto her feet, stifling his laughter and grabbing the skirt.

"Okay, I'm going to pull. Ready?"

"Just go for it."

Hiccup heaved back on the fabric and the two wrenched against each other. Suddenly, Astrid flew free from the confines of her wedding gown and staggered back into the wall. Her hair was wild around her face in all directions, hanging loose over her body. She was wearing simple trousers and a revealing shirt. Hiccup stared at the dress in his hands and looked back up at Astrid. He bit his lip. Astrid glared.

"Don't you dare," she hissed. Hiccup tried to stop, but the laughter flew from his lips. He kept laughing. Astrid cried out in anger and leapt at him. He gasped and threw the dress at her, scrambling over the bed. "Get back here, you troll!"

"Nope! I am a smart man!"

Astrid jumped onto the bed and hurled herself onto Hiccup. She rolled him over and pinned him down. A bunch of her hair fell into his face. He spat it away from his mouth.

"Since when did you have so much hair?" he asked her as she pinned him to the floor.

"I don't cut it."

"I noticed."

Astrid dug a fist into his ribs.

"Ow, ow! Okay, okay, I get it."

Astrid smiled wryly at him and cocked her head to the side.

"Well. We're alone. We're together. What shall we do?"

Hiccup sighed and ran his hand up her side. He buried his fingers in her hair and pulled her down, kissing her passionately, with more angst than he had felt in his life. Astrid's muffled gasp vibrated on his lips as he kissed her again. He rolled over, putting himself on top of her. She held onto him, kissing him deeply and yearningly. She parted his mouth open so she could taste his tongue, feel the tickle of it on her own, but suddenly, he was gone.

He leapt to his feet and called out of the dragon door. It was a Nadder call, and he heard Stormfly call from afar, signalling that she was en route. He spun to Astrid and scooped her up again. He kissed her even harder, but pulled away for another moment.

"We don't have to do anything tonight if you're not ready," he said quickly. "Okay?"

"Okay," Astrid replied breathlessly, wanting to kiss Hiccup again. But she pulled back and looked at him with concern cloaking her brow. He put a hand on his cheek. "Hiccup, how long have you been warm like this? Are you sure you don't have a fever or something?"

Hiccup shrugged and smiled. "I feel wonderful. Astrid, we're married. How could I not feel perfect?"

He drowned her in another kiss and her eyes fluttered shut. She wrapped her arms around him and they rocked back and forth as they kissed as deeply as they wanted to.

Stormfly landed on the roof and cooed. Hiccup pried himself free from Astrid and climbed up the ladder to the dragon door.

"I want to take you somewhere," he said. Astrid grinned and grabbed her cloak and her boots. She seized Hiccup's wrist and let him haul her up. She sat in front of him, where he wrapped his arms around her. She found herself wishing her skin was bare and quickly shoved that thought to the back of her mind as they flew into the darkness.

Hiccup whispered in her ear where to fly, his warm hands slipping under her shirt and rubbing his fiery hot hands over her stomach. She squirmed as he buried his face in her shoulder, kissing her neck and running his lips over her shoulder. She cleared her throat and tried to fly straight.

He guided her up to a cliff face, telling her to land at an abandoned dragon nest. They were scattered about Berk like stars in the sky, and Stormfly landed on the ledge to let Hiccup off. Astrid jumped off, too, and motioned for Stormfly to fly around but to stay close. Alone in the cave, Hiccup grabbed her hands and looked over the sea.

"I found this place years ago. It's quiet and safe here."

"For what?" Astrid asked, raising an eyebrow. Hiccup glared at her and shook his head.

"Not that. But this."

He pulled her to the edge of the cavern. The sheer drop made Astrid nervous, but over the sky, the lights danced beyond the clouds. Greens and purples and blues, ribbons of divine light, cascaded over the spill of sky and Astrid gasped at the sheer beauty of it. This side of the island was much clearer, and the stars gleamed and the wind blew on their faces gently. Hiccup held her hand and turned her. He gripped the back of her neck and tilted her head up, kissing her lightly, teasingly.

Astrid could see the colours dancing over her eyelids as Hiccup's kisses, light as butterfly wings, trailed her lips, down her chin, the side of her neck. She hummed in her throat as his warm kisses sent her into a quiet frenzy. He picked her up and gently rested her on her cloak, the heat from his body alone warming her. The quiet sound of the sea crashing into the cliff made them fall into a trance. He tangled her fingers in her hair as he kissed her hands, down her arm, spending time on her delicate wrists, her scarred knuckles. He kissed her collarbones and kissed her mouth again.

She purred and held onto him as he rested his body on hers. Gods, he was so warm, the heat radiating from his wedding shirt into her skin like sunlight. She kissed him harder and they rolled over. She was on top of him, unbuttoning his shirt to get at his chest. She felt his body, the bandages still covering the Skrill wound, and shoved it open so she could kiss down his body. Her cool lips made Hiccup make a sound he had never made before, and it made Astrid's stomach

tighten.

She sat up, her breath laboured, and pulled off her undershirt. Her breasts were bound and covered, but that didn't stop Hiccup from having a reaction. He stared at her and ran his hands over her sides. He pulled her close again, running his hot hands over her back and digging his nails softly into her skin. Then, with a lot of thought and nervousness, Astrid pressed her hips down, pressing herself into Hiccup. He choked on a breath but kissed her deeper still.

She did it again and found her own joy out of it. Hiccup clutched at her, staggered breaths against her mouth making her moan against him. He ran his hands over her back and in a fit of heated frustration, he untied her bindings. Astrid clawed at them with him, heart racing and stomach cold, but when she was free, she immediately pressed her bare chest on Hiccup's. The heat against the cold, the cool against the warm, made the two of them shudder. Their kisses were harder, more determined, a competition between mouths hungry for something they had not yet tasted.

Astrid sat up and pull Hiccup up with her. Holding her against him, Hiccup moaned again, sweat beading on his forehead. But Astrid pulled away. It was not the kind of weather that allowed for sweat.

"Hiccup?" she asked hurriedly. She gave him a little shake and he pressed his fingers to his eyes. Astrid pulled her undershirt on hastily as Hiccup groaned again.

"Gods, you're burning up," Astrid whispered. His skin was too warm to ignore, almost too hot to touch, like a hot rock near a fire. Hiccup blinked again and scratched at his neck. In the light of the sky, Astrid could make out a very angry, red mark. It was blistering over his neck. She scrambled up and called for Stormfly. She raced back to Hiccup and ripped the rest of his shirt off.

"Hiccup, we need to cool you down! Is that a bug bite or something?"

Hiccup couldn't form a word, but he lurched and heaved to the side. Red splattered the wall of the cavern. Hiccup sagged to the ground, gasping for breath, clawing at his throat. Astrid cried out and hauled him up. He looked at her with sluggish alarm.

"Something'sâ€| wrongâ€| " he wheezed.

Astrid gritted her teeth as she forced him to his feet. Stormfly flew to the opening of the cavern and chortled when she saw Hiccup sag against Astrid. His fever was getting worse, so much so that the heat began to burn Astrid. She forced him onto her dragon and sat behind him, diving from the cliff face and back to Berk, Astrid praying to the gods that her bad luck had not returned.

11. The Bond

New chappie for the week! Thank you to the readers and supporters of this story; every comment I hear about it is treasured and I am honoured to share this with you. They are never ignored. :)

* * *

><p>Chapter Eleven: The Bond

"No, no no no!" Astrid growled, straightening Hiccup in her saddle, trying her hardest to stay on Stormfly. The Deadly Nadder shot through the air. Her wing was cramping from the weight of Hiccup's weak body. He lurched again, more blood coating his hands over Stormfly's back. Astrid smacked his back to help him cough it up, but even touching him like that burnt her hand. She could hear the hissing of her flesh burning, and she cursed as they flew into the village.

Stormfly landed messily, throwing Astrid forward into Hiccup's bare back. She gasped as the heat burnt her cheek and she pulled away to get him off the dragon.

"Gods, oh gods," a gentle voice gasped from a dark alley. Astrid's head snapped over, desperate and sweaty.

"Help!" she screamed, knowing someone would be near. "Somebody help!"

The figure raced up to Astrid, who was trying to keep Hiccup on his feet, his arm making her shoulders blister. She gritted her teeth and sobbed against the pain. Another pair of hands reached forward and grabbed his other arm.

"We need to get him inside," Rose instructed, her brown hair spilling over her green eyes, her nightgown little protection against the cold of night and heat of Hiccup's skin. "Give him to me."

"He's too warm!" Astrid cried.

"Not for me, he isn't."

With surprising strength, Rose hoisted Hiccup's limp arm over her head and rested it over her shoulders, lifting the weight from Astrid, who had raw shoulders and blisters. Rose, tiny and gentle Rose, carried him into Hiccup and Astrid's home. She dragged him without aid — he made Rose's nightgown shoulder and singe — and rested him in a tub of cold water, already drawn and apparently ready for this purpose.

"We can't wake anyone," Rose grunted as she cut the belt of Hiccup's pants completely free with a perrin knife. Astrid knotted her fingers into her hair, tears flowing maniacally.

"What is going on?" she choked.

"Help me get his pants off," Rose interrupted. Astrid hissed and paced around the room.

"What do we do? What do we do?!" Astrid repeated over and over.

Rose pursed her lips and squeezed her eyes shut. "Hiccup is burning faster than we can keep him cool. If you don't let me help him, Hiccup is going to die. Help me. Please, Astrid."

Astrid took a moment and nodded, dropping to her knees to help Rose

with Hiccup. She pulled Hiccup's pants off, and seeing him naked didn't register with her at that moment. She only stared for a second too long; she never thought the first time seeing him would be like this. She put her hands on Hiccup's face, his fever scarring her palms, as Rose turned to Stormfly at the dragon door.

There was an intense look between Rose and Stormfly. Stormfly chortled and disappeared. Astrid looked back at Rose.

"What was that?"

"Your dragon needs to find ice. A lot of it."

"You didn't say anything!"

"ASTRID," Rose barked. "We don't have time for this!"

Astrid backed away as Rose turned Hiccup's head, revealing the blistered and infected wound on his neck.

"It settled quickly," Rose muttered. She cried out, a shriek of sorts, and Toothless slammed down the stairs. Astrid leapt out of her skin; no one could call Toothless but Hiccup, and yet here he was, tongue lolling and eyes in slits.

Hiccup's eyes snapped open and he choked on another wave of bloody vomit. It sprayed over Rose, who kept her eyes shut and her lips pressed tight. Astrid fell onto her back but Rose wiped the blood from her eyes. A huge clump of ice fell from the dragon door and Astrid ran to grab it. She threw it into the water to cool it down and Hiccup's eyes fluttered.

"It's happening," Rose spat. "Toothless â€œ"

Desperate and full of bizarre panic, Astrid grabbed Rose by the hair and threw her into Hiccup's writing desk. The air left her lungs as the table careened into her gut, and she fell to the floor coughing. Astrid's eyes were burning with hatred.

"I don't know who you are," Astrid spat, "but you better start explaining things to me right now."

"Astrid, we don't have time!" Rose coughed.

"Then BE QUICK!" Astrid screamed.

Rose cursed and threw herself at Astrid, grabbing the knife with surprising agility and strength. She bent Astrid's wrist back, biting her arm until she let go. Astrid fell back and Rose snarled in her face.

"I come from a small island where terror creeps in the dark. The women are raped every night and the men are beaten with weapons you cannot even imagine. I have seen flesh torn off of children and my own mother forced to feed dragons to other dragons. And you know what I do? I keep more people safe with my knowledge, the discoveries I have made to keep people alive."

Astrid stared up at Rose, terrified at her hateful talk. "I have connections to Hiccup that I am in no position to speak about. If I

do, my mother will be torn apart slowly by Whispering Deaths, turned inside out before my very eyes. Hiccup cannot be ignored and I know how to save him. So either you let me to save both Hiccup and my mother, or we can keep fighting and you can watch him die on your wedding night."

A small nod was the only reply Rose got. It was all she needed as she motioned to Toothless. She grabbed Hiccup's limp hand in hers and lifted it.

"Almost seven years ago, you faced the Red Death. When Hiccup fell from the sky. Makes you wonder, how did Toothless catch Hiccup as he fell? The story has been different everywhere, but it only makes sense in one way: Toothless willingly grabbed him with his teeth. He tried first with his gums, but Hiccup would have slipped, making Toothless' teeth cut into the skin and breaking his bone. He flipped Hiccup up and grabbed him, protecting him as they hit the ground, but breaking his leg clean off."

Rose ran her fingers over the wound on his neck, rubbing the clotted blood free to clean the gash. Astrid looked down at her, her heart racing as Hiccup began to pale.

"When he bit Hiccup willingly, willful venom entered Hiccup's blood stream along with blood from Toothless' gums. Willful venom has never been heard with any other dragon, but Toothless' saved Hiccup and created an unbreakable bond that dragons would talk about for years afterwards. A bond that extends the ties of friendship. The venom had a different effect than it would have if he had meant to poison. Instead, he meant to save him."

"How do you know that? How does this make sense?" Astrid growled.

Rose bent her head to the side, a horrendous scar wrapping over her shoulder and down her back. "A dragon heard about it and decided to experiment with me. I was at the end of my life and I had my own companion that tried to revive me like Hiccup had been. Only I walked away with much, much more. It's a key to something much more powerful."

Toothless opened his mouth, showing a small scar over his tongue.

"I went to Toothless, knowing that I had one chance to try, and Toothless offered his venom and blood, which I myself put into Hiccup's system. It is rough, but if we do this right, Hiccup will be so much more than a dragon rider. And to be honest, he's going to need that if the tides turn like I think they will."

"How do you know all this about Toothless?!" Astrid said, exasperated. "Where are you getting this from?!"

Rose smiled, Hiccup's hand in hers. "Because, Astrid, I can talk to dragons."

Rose motioned to Toothless, who reared back and filled his mouth with flame. Astrid rolled and scream, reaching out to stop the Night Fury before he spewed the flames over Hiccup's body. The last thing Astrid saw was Hiccup lying aflame in the bathtub, his flesh sizzling in the heat, her body weak and faint. Then she felt the ground beneath her

cheek, followed by darkness.

* * *

><p>He was falling through the air again. The gigantic tail of the Red Death swooped down as the dragon collapsed on itself. He pulled on the rein, but it was no good. Toothless' tail was gone and the Red Death crashed into him. But he did not faint. He was wide awake, watching his own body fall down into the cloud of fire. He reached forward, and felt the teeth crunch into his lower leg. It snapped as Toothless wrenched him up, flipping him into a pair of scaly arms. The pain was immense, his leg was bleeding, but the fire around them burnt the stump closed. Hiccup screamed and Toothless crashed into the ground, sending Hiccup into darkness.</p>

The heat was all around him, the fire burning his body. His neck hurt, his body trembled. He wanted to die. He wanted to fly. He wanted to jump into a fire. He wanted to never wake.

"_Looove_!" The hiss screamed through his soul and he cried out.

* * *

><p>Suddenly it was quiet. Astrid forced herself to sit up, but hours had passed after what felt like minutes. Her shoulders had been bandaged and slathered in ointment, along with her hands. Her hair was braided for sleep, which apparently happened. She was in her new bed. She whirled around and found Hiccup sleeping. His neck had no blemish upon it and he was curled up next to her, snoring soundly. She gasped and almost shook him awake, but something made her stop. She merely reached over, running a finger over his cheek to see if he was real. He was. She glared and slipped out of bed, grabbing her cloak to find Rose and get a better explanation.</p>

* * *

><p>"Looove!"

Hiccup peeled his eyes open, rubbing his head. The words crashed into his head again, making his head throb.

"_Waaake._"

He forced himself to sit up, feeling different and strong, not remembering the events of last night. They went to the cave and then nothing.

"_Waaake._"

Hiccup groaned under his breath, shaking his head and too groggy to make out anything logical.

"_WAAKE_!" the voice screamed Hiccup jumped.

"Gah! I'm awake, I'm awake!"

He looked around the room, but there was no one there. His bed was empty â€“ where was Astrid? â€“ and he caught the gaze of Toothless, who sat at the foot of his bed looking terribly anxious.

"_Saaafe_." the voice rumbled. Hiccup's eyes widened.

"â€|Toothless?"

"_Heelllooo._" Toothless forced his mouth into a smile.
"_Hello_."

Hiccup scrambled back and hit the headboard as Toothless cooed and cocked his head to the side.

"_Hello._"

Hiccup swallowed. "â€|Uh, hi bud."

Toothless jumped up and perked his ears into the air.
"_Bond_."

Hiccup's head was filled with fiery memories of his neck cut by the knife at the knife-throwing competition, being so warm, being sick all day at his wedding.

"_Bond_."

Hiccup raised an eyebrow. "You can talk to meâ€|"

"_Hello_."

"Hi, yes, hello."

"_Hello._"

Hiccup couldn't help but smile. "I guess you're pretty excited about this, hey?"

"_Happy_."

He smiled again and Hiccup laughed. "I guessâ€| I could get used to it. But how?"

"_Rooose. Rose. Kin. She speak. We speak. You speak. Kin._"

"Rose?" Hiccup rubbed his forehead and shoved his blankets off. He squeaked. "Where are my pants?"

* * *

><p>Astrid flew Stormfly to the docks and leapt off, looking back and forth for Rose. Many of the clans had left already. She marched over to Gobber who was helping another ship set sail.</p>

"Where is Rose?" she asked harshly.

"Ah! Good morning, Astrid? Have a good night?" he asked playfully.

Astrid frowned. "Long story. Where is she?"

"She sailed off with trader Johann early this morning. Looked to be in a bit of a state. But she's gone home."

Astrid clenched her hands into fists and huffed. Stoick noticed her bandaged hands and motioned to them.

"Had a bit of an accident?" he asked.

"Just a weird night. I'll see you later, Gobber. I'm heading home."

Astrid flew back to her house and entered the house, quick to rush up the stairs to see if Hiccup had woken. What she found was Hiccup trying to pull on his pants, being quite unsuccessful as Toothless bounced around the room, shaking the floor, and that combined with Astrid gawking at him while he tried to cover his nudity, Hiccup fell on his face.

"Good morning!" he stammered. "I'm sorry, Toothless, grab me a ¢"

Toothless dropped a blanket over Hiccup.

"¢|Thanks."

Astrid stared and Hiccup looked up at her, struggling to his feet. She crossed the room slowly and his smile faded.

"Are you alright?" he asked. "Your shoulders, your hands¢| what happened?"

Astrid's lip quivered. She raised a hand and slapped Hiccup across the face.

"Don't you ever scare me like that Hiccup!" she shrieked. Hiccup held his cheek and stared, bewildered. "You almost died, I watched you AGAIN!"

"What?" Hiccup gasped. "I feel fine."

"You were dying!" Astrid screamed. "That bitch, that girl that was always getting close to you, she poisoned you!"

"Wait, what? Rose? How?"

"That knife-throwing thing! That little cut on your neck turned into a festering monster!"

Hiccup swallowed. Astrid paced about the room.

"And when you passed out ¢" after puking blood ¢" I dragged you home and guess who was waiting for me! HER! And she forced you into our tub while you kept puking and groaning and DYING, saying shit like she knew how to talk to dragons, that she talked to Toothless about your leg and how that created some sort of infection that would last seven years ¢" THE POINT IS YOU WERE DYING!"

Hiccup stared at her as she rubbed her eyes, trying to get a deep breath. She sucked in a lungful of air.

Hiccup licked his lips and looked at Toothless. He grimaced and asked quietly, "She said she could talk to dragons?"

"IS THAT THE ONLY IMPORTANT PIECE OF INFORMATION YOU GOT FROM THIS?!" Astrid shrieked. Hiccup staggered back.

"I can hear Toothless!" he blurted. Astrid froze and Toothless nodded at Astrid. She looked between the two of them and scoffed.

"You're lying, that's impossible."

"No, Astrid, listen to me, it doesn't make any sense, but I remember falling and losing my leg because Toothless does. We can talk and sometimes he can tell what I'm thinking!"

Astrid scoffed again and she looked terribly angry. She shook her head and closed her eyes. Toothless took his leave and leapt out of the dragon door, leaving Astrid staring at Hiccup. She waited until she was sure Toothless was gone before closing her eyes.

"None of this makes senseâ€| you were burning so hot that you burnt my hands, my shoulders, and I had to watch you, my husband, go through wave after wave of painâ€| and yet you have nothing wrong with you. No cuts, no blisters. And now you can talk to Toothless."

Astrid wavered and sagged to the ground. Hiccup jumped and raced across the room, grabbing her and steadyng her. He lifted her into his arms, making sure his blanket didn't fall off, and he carried her to the bed, kissing her forehead. "I'm sorry I scared you, Astrid," he whispered. He rested her on the bed and crawled next to her. He put the blanket over them.

"You're still warm," she muttered.

"Not worrisomely," he added with a grin.

"You're also naked."

Hiccup backed away awkwardly. "Yeah, about thatâ€| I woke up without my pants and while I know last night was a bit of a mess, did weâ€|?"

Astrid smiled softly. "No."

She pressed her body against his and breathed in his scent.

"I love you," she whispered. "But don't do that ever again, or I will kill you."

Hiccup chuckled and nodded, kissing her forehead and rocking her back and forth, whispers of Toothless echoing in his head.

After hours of snoozing and cuddling, Hiccup woke up to the tickle of lips on his neck. He purred as Astrid pushed him onto his back and kissed his neck. She lifted her head, her cheeks red.

"Are you sure you're alright?" she asked.

"Mhmm."

Astrid smiled and kissed his neck again, but with force, making his

neck tense up and his throat seize. He gasped and ran his hands up her body as she kissed his neck and led her own way to his mouth, kissing him heatedly. He groaned through his teeth when she bit his lip. She pulled away suddenly and shook her head.

"I'm sorry. You've had a long night and I shouldn't â€œ"

Hiccup grabbed the back of her neck, tangling his hand in her braid, and crushed her mouth with his, his body on fire with pent-up passion. She moaned into his mouth as their lips parted and met again, tongue exploring each other. Hiccup flipped them, careful to keep her bandages clear of pressure, and dragged his tongue down her smooth neck to her collarbone. She wriggled about, parting her legs so he could lie between them.

He lifted her shirt and kissed his way up her belly, tugging at the laces expertly with his fingers and freeing her from her clothing. She wiggled out of it and Hiccup grabbed the bindings around her breasts. He pulled them free and kissed her breast, making her gasp and purr and giggle. He laughed gently against her skin as he ran his hands over them softly, up to her cheeks where he kissed her again.

With a deep breath, she reached between them and slowly ran her hand down his stomach, over the bandages from the Skrill attack. She felt it tighten and she paused, but when he didn't stop kissing her, she reached the final distance and touched it. He arched his back and shuddered. She stared at his face as it contorted into a face of pleasure. She loved it and gently moved her hand, making him shudder over her over and over again. She grew warm inside and kissed him again. She was amazed by how it felt in her hand â€œ she hadn't really gotten a good look at it, but she didn't think it would be like this â€œ and she yearned for more.

Hiccup gasped again and reached down, pulling her trousers over her hips. He had to lean to the side so she could kick them off, but when they were finally off, keeping their eyes shut tight and their kisses deep, he reached down and rested his fingers on her.

She gasped and choked from the simple touch, but Hiccup kept kissing her, carefully and lightly moving his fingers so she would squirm and forget to move her own hand on him. She wondered if it felt different than he expected, if he felt her scars or was put off by the feel of it, but he kissed her deeply. With one of his fingers, he slipped inside and she tensed up. He buried his face in her shoulder gently.

"Are you alright?" he asked, almost silent. Astrid nodded and let herself relax. It was a small sting, but nothing surprising, and he moved slowly, gently, and she moaned into his hair. He moved at a pace that made her shiver and she squeezed her own hand to make him groan.

He pulled himself over her again and stared at her. He ran his eyes over her body, his hands by her shoulders and her resting on her stomach, feeling lost and somehow useless.

"You're beautiful," he murmured.

"So are you," she replied shakily.

He grabbed her hand and kissed it. "We don't have to do anything you don't want to."

Astrid swallowed and caught her breath. "We wouldn't be."

Hiccup smiled against her fingers. "I can't say I wouldn't mind, either."

There was a tense silence as they looked at each other, their bodies resembling new paintings to be looked at and enjoyed. She pulled on him to rest on top of her. She felt it against her and she caught her breath. Hiccup's eyes flickered and he bit his lip.

"Are you sure?"

Astrid froze, but nodded timidly. "Just stop if I need to."

"Anything you want, my love."

He kissed her and lifted himself so he was in the right position. Astrid reached between them to guide him.

"My wife," he whispered against her lips. The word made her smile. He put some weight against her and she moved her legs higher to ready herself.

They sucked in a breath together and held it, kissing each other and closing their eyes. With one more second of silence, Hiccup moved his hips forward slowly, and Astrid squeezed her eyes shut as the pain shot through her gut. The sting of his body filling hers made her hiss a breath through her teeth. Hiccup groaned loudly and kept himself propped up on his elbows, kissing Astrid to keep himself from making any more sound. He tried his hardest to stay still so Astrid could get used to it.

Astrid relaxed herself and moved her hips, begging for some sort of movement. Hiccup moved slowly, keeping in pace with Astrid as she got used to the pain, the groan of discomfort replaced with the gasps of pleasure. She wrapped her arms around him and felt his body, his muscles, with her hand and finding sheer joy out of feeling his shoulders tense with every soft thrust and shudder. They were the same person, they were finally complete.

They didn't dare change positions for their first venture, scared to give Astrid anymore pain than was necessary. But she gasped his name and he moved faster, pushing deeper and grinding himself into her, making her sigh and gasp. He choked on her name, the feeling of heat and Astrid's body making his stomach clench. He moved even faster, moaning and tightening everywhere. He was reaching the peak, she was reaching the peak, they were finding it hard to breathe, to slow down, their hearts racing in unison.

Astrid cried out in pained pleasure, wriggling as Hiccup gasped and pulled himself away just in time. Heat spilled over Astrid's stomach as Hiccup gritted his teeth and groaned. He shuddered violently and relaxed, breathing in as much air as he could, Astrid following suit.

They rested their sweaty foreheads against the other and both gave a bout of breathless laughter. Hiccup kissed her sloppily and looked between them.

"â€|Ohâ€| Oh dear," he laughed. He reached over the bed to grab his pants and mopped up the mess. Then he pulled Astrid against him and sighed happily. Astrid giggled and nuzzled into his chest.

It hurt. She knew it would. But it was a pain that she enjoyed, a pain that told her she had made it. She had given herself to someone gentle and loving, kind and honest. She knew she loved Hiccup, and now that she knew him more than anyone else ever would, she found herself enraptured and blessed by the gods themselves. Hiccup was alive, and Hiccup was her husband, and Hiccup proved to her that the damage she did to herself didn't change anything. That made her world perfect.

12. Dreams

Happy Thursday, as always! Some elements from the television series are included; if there are references you don't understand, message me and I'll let you know what's up!

* * *

><p>Chapter Twelve: Dreams

"Come on, bud, don't be shy. Try again."

Hiccup, his legs crossed on a boulder near his house, stared intensely at Toothless. The Night Fury cooed and kept his head down. His ears were pressed against his head and his wide eyes didn't make eye contact. He was embarrassed.

"â€|Aâ€|Astâ€|_"

Toothless growled and stomped. Hiccup raised his hands and leapt off the boulder. He rested a hand on Toothless' head and smiled. "It's okay. Only I can hear you. It's not like anyone is going to make fun of you."

Toothless looked up and huffed. "Hard. Much hard."

"Very hard," Hiccup corrected.

"Very hard," Toothless repeated. He perked up when Hiccup nodded and sat up straight. "Astâ€| Astriiâ€|_"

Hiccup urged him to keep trying, keeping a hand on Toothless' snout.

"Astriiiâ€| Astridâ€| Astrid_!"

"You did it!" Hiccup cried as Toothless bounced up and down.

"Success," Toothless quipped.

Hiccup squinted and stared at Toothless, a smile on his lips. "Can

you hear my thoughts, too?"

"_Bond_?" Toothless asked silently. "_Very new. Very strange. Much time._"

Hiccup licked his lips and scooted closer. He opened his mouth to ask a question, but Astrid rounded the boulder and laughed. Toothless perked up and repeated her name over and over, giving Hiccup a massive headache immediately. Astrid stared, lips parted, as Hiccup calmed Toothless, laughing painfully.

Astrid smiled and watched Hiccup in trousers and a fur vest â€“ a difference to his riding suit, and a gentle reminder of his younger years â€“ jump around, waving his arms madly. She leaned back on the rock while Hiccup motioned to the village. "Go have some fun, bud."

Toothless' shoulders seemed to sag, but Astrid grinned and rested a hand on his snout. "It's alright, you can have him back in a while."

The Night Fury trotted off, supposedly heading to the river or perhaps the Academy. Astrid slowly turned to Hiccup and her smile wavered. Hiccup looked at her up and down, noticing her plain clothes and her furry blanket pulled from their bed. Her hair was in its thick braid. He shifted from foot to metal spring, the squeak of his prosthetic leg breaking the silence.

"Hiccup, I don't know about this."

Hiccup groaned. "Astrid, it's just a little practice!"

"No, Hiccup, it's more than that," Astrid pressed. "Aren't you thinking about what happened?"

Hiccup shrugged guiltily and looked up. "I'm working with what I have."

Astrid neared him and grabbed his face. She kissed him and pulled away, keeping her warm hands on his cheeks. "But what you have was cursed upon you by some girl who came from gods know where and after almost killing you on our wedding night, and gave youâ€¦ this trick of hearing Toothless?"

"It's not a trick, it's real," Hiccup replied. "And I don't know why Rose did it, or why she didn't warn me, but I have no other option than to begin living with it."

Astrid frowned. "You still don't remember anything?"

Hiccup raised his arms and rested them on hers. "She was a harmless girl."

"You weren't exactly in the right mind to remember what I had to see," Astrid muttered. "And she said things about her home that made my skin crawl. Things about people getting hurt and dragons being food for other dragons."

Hiccup swallowed and looked over the valley before looking back. "We've been at peace for years. The dragons are free for us to train,

no one has attacked us after the Outcasts fled!"

"So then where did Rose come from?" Astrid asked firmly. "If she comes from a place as dark as she described, wouldn't you be worried? What if she's an enemy?"

"An enemy wouldn't have done this to me," Hiccup defended. "She gave me a gift that I can use! Talking to Toothless connects us more, either as a weapon " which will never happen " or as a defense. My enemy would have killed me with poison, not make me better than I already am."

Astrid looked away and rubbed her forehead. She was pained, troubled. She stepped away and walked back into the house, leaving Hiccup behind to look over the ocean. He wanted to tell her he wasn't sure about the situation, but at this time, nothing told him something was amiss.

* * *

><p>Training Toothless took more than three months of hard determination. Hiccup spent his weeks scouting the island as usual, teaching Toothless how to speak in short sentences, and loving Astrid in the comfort of their own home. They had arguments about Toothless, but eventually, the hubbub died down. But no one else knew about the development; only Astrid, Hiccup, and Toothless knew about Rose's strange gift.</p>

They were lying in their bed, months after their wedding day, the chaos calm and quiet, when Hiccup groaned quietly in his sleep.

He was flying, but not as a rider, a dragon. It was cloudy. Rumbles shook his bones. His wings were tired. His body hurt. Something stung his back. Slashes, bruises. He wanted to go home. Where was home? But if he didn't fly, he would die. Why would he die? He dove through the clouds. His target was below. Berk. Flashes of lightning streaked the air, danced on his body, filled his mouth. He didn't want to. He had to. Why? The arena, the place smelled faintly of blood and death. A scream, a tiny girl screaming. A man, another dragon. Night Fury? The Dragon Saviour? Is that him? No, I have a mission, a mission, if I don't, I will die. Kill the Saviour. Must I? No. Kin. Bond. She said don't. She is kind. But I will die, the others will kill me. He is running, the Saviour, I must kill him. I swipe, my wings are sharp and true. I don't want to. I hit him, I smell his blood. But he protects the child. Saviour, true and kind, like her, he saves her. I must leave. I must go. I will die. Saviour lives. But I will not tell. I will say he died. I will lie. I must lie. I will die. I will die. I will die.

"_HICCUP_!"

Hiccup gasped, his eyes snapped open. Astrid was on top of him, her strong arms holding him down. He tried to get a breath down and sucked in the air as Astrid gave him another shake. Hiccup sat up and clutched Astrid's body to his, burying his face in her chest, gasping her name over and over.

"Hiccup, gods, what is going on?" Astrid asked breathlessly. Hiccup squeezed tighter, trying to breathe.

"The Skrill!" Hiccup cried. "The Skrill!"

Astrid ran her hands through his hair as his body broke into shivers. She rocked him back and forth, staring at the wall behind him.

"I saw him, I saw me, how he hurt me, gods, he said he was going to die, I was in so much pain â€""

"Shh," Astrid whispered. "Shh, my love. The Skrill is gone. You are safe with me. I won't let anything hurt you. No pain."

Hiccup held her tighter than he ever had, letting her coax him back to sleep, his body covered in sweat. Toothless, meanwhile, was outside, staring over the waves of the ocean, his eyes in slits and his teeth bared. He knew something was wrong. Something was shifting. Something was starting.

* * *

><p>Tired and shaken, Hiccup and Astrid marched over to the Great Hall, knowing Stoick and Gobber would be there breaking their fast. They walked without words; Hiccup had been thinking of the nightmare in detail while Astrid swallowed a wave of nausea down. She had a hope from the feeling, but pushed it aside.</p>

They entered the hall and met Stoick at his table with Spitelout. Stoick noticed them and grinned.

"Ah, morning my son!"

"We need to talk," Hiccup said sternly. The tone was unfriendly and his eyes were serious. Stoick blinked and raised his shoulders. Spitelout shot a glare to Stoick, and Astrid cringed; no one talked to the chief like that. No one.

"Aye, speak."

Hiccup took a deep breath and rubbed his eyes, unsure of where to start. The other villagers saw the interaction and began to move away while Gobber approached. Vikings knew when they were needed and unneeded.

"During our wedding celebrations," Hiccup began shakily, "one of the guests did something to me."

Stoick and Gobber looked at each other and looked back, unsure of how to respond. "That was as vague as you could make it, boy," Stoick grumbled. "I'm going to need more than that."

"That's all we can tell you," Astrid replied. "We don't know what she did besides poison him."

Stoick's eyebrows raised sharply. He looked at Hiccup up and down before Hiccup raised his hands. Hiccup continued.

"She inflicted thisâ€| capability upon me. I grew ill, I went faint, and then I woke up. Astrid told me what happened, and when I woke up, Toothlessâ€|"

He was silent until Stoick motioned for him to continue. Toothless

bumped against Hiccup's legs to urge him to keep talking.

"I woke up and I could hear Toothless," Hiccup said painfully.

Stoick furrowed his brows, truly confused. "What are you saying, lad?"

"He's saying that Toothless can talk to him," Astrid explained. "Their minds are connected through what Toothless calls 'a bond' that this guest created between them through what I think was poison."

Gobber scoffed. "That's not possible."

"Apparently, it is," Hiccup groaned, "but that's not the important part; I can explain that later. Since this happened, I have been having dreams, dreams where I can see from the eyes of Toothless usually."

Stoick sighed loudly, trying to understand. "Usually?"

"Last night, I had a dream of the Skrill," Hiccup muttered. "The Skrill that attacked me."

Stoick gritted his teeth and Gobber squinted.

"It's never happened before, I have always dreamt of Toothless, but this dream was back when I was hurt, and I think the Skrill wasn't working alone."

Gobber leaned in, his interchangeable hand " now a mug " hit the table. "You mean there are more Skrills lurking about yearning to get a piece of you or something?"

"No, I mean I think he was sent," Hiccup replied.

There was another look between the two men and Toothless perked up to see their reactions. They were speechless for a time until Stoick looked down at his plate, thinking.

"Son, this doesn't make much sense."

"We know," Astrid replied. "We weren't going to say anything so long as it stayed peaceful, but the dreams have never been wrong. Because they're not fake, they're actual perspectives."

"Even if the Skrill was sent, who would do that? We've been at peace for years!" Gobber exclaimed.

"Years ago, we found a Skrill in a block of ice, remember that?" Hiccup asked hurriedly.

It was true. Just months after learning how to walk again, Hiccup and Astrid found an iceblock with a Skrill frozen within. They excavated it carefully and brought it to Berk to make sure it was in fact a Skrill when the twins " who else? " freed it, where it wreaked havoc upon the village and dragons.

"And after it got out, we had to pursue it to freeze it again because

we couldn't train it. But there was also another party there trying to break it out."

"The Berserkers," Stoick growled.

The Berserkers were the naval threat to the alliance. Living on a thousand warships manned with deranged and blood-lusty men and women, they used to sail the ocean searching for wild dragons to hunt just outside the borders of the alliance. Hiccup and Dagur had met a few times, on islands in neutral territory, where Dagur would try to kill Toothless for sport, Hiccup getting in the way at the last moment each time.

"Dagur. We haven't seen his awful face in years. Which is why I'm not understanding this clearly. You tell me you can talk to Toothless, that's one thing. But to propose that a long-lost enemy who has been lost to the alliance may have sent it to kill you is another thing in itself."

Gobber slurped his mead and nodded. "The man couldn't do anything with a wild dragon even if we all held his hand and gave him the book."

Hiccup frowned. "The Skrill was trained."

Gobber coughed on his mead and Stoick blinked. The chief stood up and lumbered over Hiccup. "What?"

Astrid, holding onto Hiccup's arm, pulled back her shoulders bravely. "The Skrill was sent by a trainer to kill Hiccup."

Hiccup pressed his palms against the table, hanging his head, trying to stay calm. "This Skrill wasn't trained like we train dragons, when I was dreaming, I felt like I had been beaten, whipped even. And he knew if he didn't kill me, he would die instead."

The men all shuddered uncomfortably at the thought. Dragons had become so embedded in their lives that the thought of hurting them was repulsive.

"Then why didn't he kill you?" Gobber asked. "No offence, but that dragon should have been able to rip you apart more effectively than he did."

"Heâ€| he didn't because he called me a Saviour. The Dragon Saviour. And when he saw me protect Snowdrop, he suddenly refused to. He smelled the blood and chose to spare me."

The men were quiet for a time, and even Astrid stared at Hiccup with her lips parted. Hiccup stared into his father's eyes.

"I... will look into it," Stoick sighed. "At least to calm your nervesâ€| I will arrange to send out a party to make a search for the Armada. That is, of course, assuming he even has one. I was hoping that ass-rat was long dead with how quiet he's been."

"Quiet isn't his style," Gobber mused.

Stoick motioned over to Spitelout to give instructions, but paused and looked back.

"Who was that villager that did this to you?" Stoick asked.

Astrid gritted her teeth and spat the words in sudden anger. "Rose. She came without escort or companions and was the first to leave."

Stoick nodded and looked over to Spitelout again while Hiccup looked to his wife, unsure if he was pleased that Stoick knew what Rose had done. Spitelout lumbered up, readjusting his belt. He had gained some weight in the peace-time.

"Spiteout, prepare your boy and the twins to search for the Armada, and Dagur. Just stay away from Outcast Island. I'm not happy with how these strange events are happening again."

Spiteout sighed and nodded. A patrol had not been sent out beyond the island for years and those who would fly out hadn't kept up on their training as per requirements. At least not the elder soldiers.

Hiccup straightened his posture and squared his shoulders. "I'm going with you," he stated.

Stoick turned from Spitelout to stare at his son, giving him a strange look before nodding once. "Very well. You leave tonight at sundown, especially if you want to come back by morning. I don't want you out there longer than that, understood? Justâ€œ be careful."

Hiccup nodded and spun around, heading out of the hall and leaving it in a loud commotion as the patrol was chosen and informed. Astrid grabbed Hiccup's arm and kept pace with him.

"I'm coming with you," she said. Hiccup shook his head.

"You can't, Astrid. We'll be flying over water, and Stormfly's wing keeps cramping."

"I'll ride with you, then," Astrid argued.

Nearing their house, Hiccup grabbed her hands and pulled her inside. He looked into her eyes fiercely, his heart twisting. He became enraptured in her icy blue eyes, her pink lips, her large cheeks, her blonde hair that was never perfect or tidy. He kissed her and held her hands to his chest.

"I can't risk that, my love."

Astrid sneered and shoved his hands away. "Don't you 'my love' me, Hiccup Haddock Horrendous! I can handle it!"

Hiccup sighed in frustration. "It's not because I think you can't handle yourself, trust me, I know better than anyone else that you can."

"Just because I married you, sleep with you, doesn't make me soft. I want to come with you," Astrid groaned. Hiccup winced at the comment and Astrid grabbed his face. She glared at him. "I vowed to stay by your side, no matter what."

Hiccup bit his lip and smiled, pressing his forehead to hers and sighing gently.

"If anything looks amiss with Stormfly, I'm sending you home."

"That won't happen," Astrid said, grinning. Hiccup stepped away to retrieve his riding gear but suddenly, he was pressed against the door, his mouth being attacked by hers, hungry and passionate. Hiccup gasped as Astrid moaned against his mouth, and he grabbed her clothes and pulled them off.

In the back of his mind as he and Astrid made love on the floor, he realized that she had been doing this a lot. They would have a moment alone without Toothless or Stormfly around and she would jump upon him like a wild dragon needing to be tamed. And he obliged with just as much vigor. They moaned together, his knees bruising against the hard floor and sweat beading on their bodies. He kissed her, bit her gently, and she pulled his hair and wrapped her legs around him.

When he seized up and caught his breath, she didn't let go, pulling him deeper into her and tightening around him. He didn't think about it then, but Astrid was, feeling the warmth filling her, giving a small prayer to the gods that that would do the trick.

13. Survivor

Happy Friday! A day late on the update, sincerest apologies! Super busy on my end, but here is another, as faithfully promised. Thank you to those who have followed, favourited, and reviewed Reunion. It means the world to me. —

* * *

><p>Chapter Thirteen: Survivor

Hiccup and Astrid flew under the cover of the dark upon their dragons, staying close to each other in the large patrol behind them. They had checked the coast and beyond the sea stacks, checking over the vast expanse of northern, eastern, and southern waters. No armada, no vast fleet of dark and weathered ships, were found.

It was not easy to hide a fleet of a thousand ships.

"Anything?!" Hiccup called.

"Nothing!" Snotlout replied. "It'll be dawn soon, we should turn back."

Hiccup bit his lip and nodded. "You go ahead, report back to my father with Spitelout. I'll double-check the sea stacks and be right behind you!"

He looked at Astrid, who pulled back on Stormfly and hovered. Hiccup pulled back and hovered next to her. She had a hand pressed to her lips and her face was vacant, yet troubled.

All of a sudden, she leaned over quickly and vomited.

"Astrid!" he cried as she retched. She put up a hand and shook her head.

"I'm fine," she said shakily, spitting the rest out of her mouth.
"I'm fine."

"Are you sick?" he asked as the rest of the patrol gathered around them. Astrid rolled her shoulders and shuddered.

"No, I feel fine, now. Really."

Hiccup looked to Snotlout. "Get her home to Gothi."

Astrid scoffed. "Hiccup!"

"Now," he said sternly to Snotlout. His friend nodded and flew in front of Astrid. Stormfly reared her head and turned around. Astrid wiped her mouth with the back of her hand and placed it over her abdomen. "I'll be right behind you!"

"_You lie_," Toothless whispered. Hiccup scratched him behind the fin and waited for the others to begin departing. Astrid gave Hiccup an alarmed look as they flew away, and he wondered what that meant. She quickly gathered up her reins and followed the others. Hiccup pulled back and shot into the clouds, heading north at first before making sure they were alone.

"_Why lie?_" Toothless asked.

Hiccup twisted his mouth guiltily. "Sometimes, we lie to protect those we love."

Hiccup felt that Toothless did not understand. He moved on. "Let's go check it out."

Toothless nodded and banked to the left, heading west. The ocean, thundering liquid greys crashing below, became darker as he descended into the stormy morning air. Gnarled and jagged rocks began to protrude from the water as they got closer and closer. West was forbidden territory and Hiccup knew that very well.

As they approached, Hiccup's breath caught in his throat. It stung and tasted burnt, stinging his eyes and nose and making Toothless sneeze. Smoke. Hiccup gritted his teeth and ducked his head as smoke filled his lungs.

"What?" Hiccup coughed. He pulled Toothless up to get out of the smoke, flying through the foggy veil and above. He didn't know he was so close to the island, but what he found was not a piece of land, but a smouldering pit.

The island had been completely razed, demolished and burnt to ash and ember. Hiccup stared open-mouthed and wide-eyed. They hovered above and found no ships and no movement. It had not been attacked, but it looked deliberate nonetheless.

"Are there any survivors?" Hiccup asked himself, horrified. The place smelled like death to Toothless, and he got that recognition through the bond and felt ill. Toothless clicked his tongue and sent sound

into the fire. Toothless could see echoes and thus, he would see something through the fire if there was anything to be found.

At first he found nothing. Then he found one body, burnt to a crisp. The other body he found was not human, but dragon. They moved on, tears stinging Hiccup's face and burning eyes before Toothless reared his head and dove down. Hiccup almost couldn't time his footwork with Toothless and the two came very close to crashing into the flames. Hiccup flew from Toothless' back into a smouldering pile of ash. He rolled over as Toothless bounded over to a pile of debris. He began digging.

"_Life_!" he barked as he hauled a flaming beam from the pile. Hiccup ran over to help, his lip bruising. Toothless lifted more wood and rock until Hiccup found a hand under the rubble. He grabbed the tiny white hand and pulled, praying it was attached to something much larger. A body slid forth, limp and small and blackened with soot, wearing nothing but a tattered long shirt. He could not tell if it was a boy or a girl he pulled to him, but he picked it up in his arms. The child was bone-thin in his strong arms, breaths so faint it was hard to listen to.

Hiccup hauled the frail body forward, Toothless leading the way to the shore. He crossed over the sand quickly as the sun began to rise and he plunged into the water. It was bitingly cold and Hiccup cursed loudly as it rushed over him. The body shuddered and gasped, coughing violently and arms twitching. Hiccup dunked the body down and ran his fingers through their hair, washing out the ash. He shook the body as he cleaned it quickly, hoping the cold would wake them.

"Look at me!" Hiccup growled. "Come on, wake up!"

The body whimpered and peeled open their eyes, green and bloodshot. The soot ran down their face and revealed it to be swollen and bloody. Black hair washed away to orange-red, the hair short like a boy. A boy. Bony hands and arms clothed in wet dirty sleeves too long for their wearer clutched at his collar. Chapped lips tried to say something but blood pooled forth through his teeth. He whimpered again as Hiccup tore a flask from his belt, biting the cork out with his teeth and feeding the rim to the boy's lips.

The boy slurped painfully and cried as the sunlight showed blood on the shirt. A piece of debris, shrapnel from a beam, stuck from his stomach, but it did not look deep. Hiccup grabbed it and held the boy close to him as he pulled the debris out quickly. The boy tried to scream as Hiccup pressed down.

"You're going to be okay," Hiccup promised. He hoisted the boy out of the water and forced him onto Toothless. "Fly as fast as you can," Hiccup commanded.

Toothless could fly fast if he wanted to, but when a life was at stake, he could break barriers that Hiccup could not understand. Holding on and covering the boy with his body, Hiccup and Toothless sliced through the air until Berk rose from the sunlit ocean. The boy was fading, Toothless told Hiccup that as his heartbeat grew ever fainter. Hiccup was holding the wound shut as Toothless landed.

The last of the patrol was putting away their bridles as Toothless crashed down. Most men jumped back and cursed as Hiccup leapt down

and pulled the boy with him. He crossed the landing stones to Gothi as an uproar of confusion sounded behind him. He kicked open the door to Gothi's home where the healers stayed and called for help. He found them in the main hall, startled at the sound.

"I need help!" Hiccup wheezed as the boy grew limp in his arms. Juniper rushed over and whisked him away, giving orders to the other matrons with such speed that Hiccup could not keep up. He stayed next to the boy as they pressed on his wound and forced water into his mouth. One had a knife and dug it into the boy's feet, making him jump with pain. Anything to keep him awake.

Hiccup ran to a cupboard and pulled bandages and a healing poultice forth, rushing over to stanch the bleeding. Juniper took over as the others cut away the shirt. Just before they pulled it off, a huge hand seized Hiccup and wrenched him from the room. Hiccup cried out in startled shock as he was dragged outside. He whirled around, free from the hand that had grabbed him, and faced Stoick angrily.

"What in all the gods' names is going on?!" Stoick bellowed. The rest of the patrol had gathered; Snotout and Spitelout glared over at Hiccup while Tuffnut cocked his head at the sight of blood on his hands.

"Are you hurt?" Tuffnut asked quickly.

"No, it's not mine. I'm alright, but â€“"

Stoick gave Hiccup a shake. "Whose is it, then?"

Hiccup began to explain, but Stoick wouldn't stop yelling.

"I told you to stay with the group, I told you to come back by morning!"

"Where did you find that child?" Spitelout growled. "Surely not atop one of the sea stacks."

He bit his lip and raised his voice. "I found him on Outcast Island."

Stoick's jaw dropped and his eyes flickered with rage. "You _what_?!"

The rest of the crowd hollered or murmured, all upset and unhappy with the discovery.

"Do you know what they could have done to you?!" Stoick bellowed. "I told you explicitly to stay away from there! You could have been killed!"

Hiccup snarled and pulled his hair in frustration. "I had to! I went alone, no one saw me and I had a feeling â€“"

"I don't give a shit about your feelings! What about mine? Am I to lose you to the Outcasts like we lost your mother? Or risk a war that we are not prepared to have?"

"The island is gone!" Hiccup screamed. Stoick caught his breath and glared as Hiccup shoved himself free from his father's wrath. "The

whole damned place is destroyed! There is no Outcast Island!" Hiccup thrust a hand to Gothi's home, nostrils flared and head shaking in anger. "That boy in there is the only survivor, the only living thing that was left behind and if we keep him alive, then we can get our answers! This is serious, dad, not some blind adventure I wanted to have. If you had any sense or care in the matter, you'll realize that I'm trying to say that the Outcasts knew we were looking for them and burnt their own home to the ground! They don't want to be found and I don't like that, do you?"

The crowd went silent as Stoick stared tensely at his son. If he were a child once more, he would have been smacked upside the head for raising his voice. But surprisingly, Stoick sighed and closed his eyes slowly.

"Ah, I see the chief in you, already," he spat. "Damn it all. Send another patrol to Outcast Island. I want everyone armed. I will send word to the alliance myself for precaution. We need to find out where those Outcasts are, and where the Berserkers are as well. There is no way they all got off their island without a little help. I want that boy kept alive for questioning. Move!"

The crowd dispersed, all running to their dragons or the forge. Hiccup immediately ran for the forge, knowing that they would need his help sharpening blunt swords. That, and he needed his shield. The shield he had made from Gronkel iron was the lightest and strongest weapon he had. With a push of a button, it would pop into a crossbow, and another button would send the middle of it outward with deadly force. He hadn't had to use it too much before, but there were times where it saved lives.

As Hiccup ran into the forge to grab his shield, a tiny body with a whirlwind of blonde hair leapt in front of him. He skidded to a halt in front of Snowdrop, who had her hands on her hips and a huge pout on her lips.

"Hup!" she barked as angrily as her little body could handle. She certainly was her sister's sister. "Stop right now!"

Hiccup scooped her up and held her to him as he reached down to grab his shield from behind a shelf. Snowdrop pulled his hair to get his attention as he readjusted the shield in his other hand.

"What's going on, Snowdrop," Hiccup asked quickly. "Why aren't you home with Stoick?"

"I was with Astrid," she replied. "And then I ran out to get you."

"Why?" Hiccup asked as he exited the forge, heading home at a moderate pace while the rest of the villagers ran about getting prepared. Toothless stalked next to him as Snowdrop wrapped her arms around his neck.

"She is mad that you didn't come home like you said you would. And she is sick. Why are you bleeding? Where is everyone going? I'm hungry. Did you really go to Badman Island to save that boy?"

"I'll feed you at home," Hiccup muttered as they climbed the hill to his house. They made it near, and Snowdrop wriggled free. She ran

into the house and he heard her yell to Astrid.

"Astrid, Hup is home! He went to Badman Island! I'm hungry."

Hiccup rolled his eyes and cringed as he heard Astrid's footsteps storm to the door. It was wrenched open and she raced over to him, her riding gear still on and her hair falling out of its thick braid. She crossed to Hiccup and looked at him, eyes frantic.

"You're bleeding!" she cried.

"It's not mine," Hiccup said quickly.

"Oh. Good," Astrid scoffed. She slapped him across the face.

"Hey!" Hiccup complained, holding his face.

"That's for going to Outcast Island!"

She raised her hand again but she wavered. She slumped into him, groaning jaggedly.

"Whoa, Astrid!" Hiccup gasped, his cheek throbbing. She lurched in his arms and puked next to his feet. She spat the rest out.

"Astrid?" Snowdrop asked quietly.

"I'm fine, baby. Just go inside for a second." Snowdrop disappeared into the house as she straightened herself again. "Don't worry, it's normal," she groaned, spitting again. "Apparently it happens."

"What?"

Astrid's shoulders sank as she looked around. Then she pulled Hiccup close and murmured in his ear.

"I haven't bled in two moons."

She pulled away and searched his face for a reaction. He stared and didn't understand at first. Astrid didn't know what else to do besides pull Hiccup's hand against her abdomen. He held it there for a moment until his eyes grew huge.

"Ohâ€œ! oh godsâ€œ! you'reâ€œ!"

Astrid's eyes welled up with tears as she smiled. "Yeah. We think so. It's early and it's too soon to be sure, butâ€œ!"

Hiccup grabbed her and held her against him. He buried his face in her hair and crushed her body against his as wave after wave of realization rushed over him. A baby, he thought. His baby. His family.

"So please stop putting yourself in these awful situations," Astrid murmured in his ear. "If this is happening, I need you here. Safe."

"Alright," he replied calmly. "No more adventures, no more patrols.

I... I promise... oh gods..."

He smiled, showing all of his teeth. Astrid split a grin with him, and their lips still curled in happiness met with a long and sweet kiss.

The patrols went out that night and Hiccup went to the matron with Astrid once they had departed. They entered Gothi's home quietly and entered the room where the boy had been. Juniper and the other matrons were still cleaning themselves when they entered. On the bed, the boy had been cleaned and covered, and was struggling through his breaths valiantly. He was alive.

Juniper turned to them as Hiccup and Astrid got a closer look. The boy was covered in a blanket and his face was very badly bruised and swollen. His red hair was clean and didn't appear to be healthy. His collarbones jutted from under his skin horrifyingly. Astrid narrowed her eyes at the sight of the boy. He didn't look older than twelve.

"How is he?" Hiccup asked quietly.

Juniper raised her head and sighed from exhaustion. "Well, for one, you didn't save a boy, you saved a girl."

Hiccup looked back at the body in the bed and shook his head. "That doesn't matter to me. Is she going to be okay?"

"She's a fighter, I'll give her that. But I don't know if she'll be able to keep that up. She's lost a lot of blood, probably due to the fact that you pulled whatever was in her out. She's also been starved. Her teeth tell me she's around fourteen winters old, maybe fifteen, but she has the weight of a seven-year-old."

"What else can you tell me?" Hiccup asked.

Juniper twisted her mouth and pulled the blankets back slightly. She picked up an arm and held it up. Around her wrists were cuts and bruises. "She had been bound like this for what I think were a few moons. The scarring and new wounds look like shackle markings, the likes I haven't seen for many years. The same are around her ankles. Her back is riddled with whip marks and her thighs are badly scarred from what I think you can piece together on your own."

Hiccup swallowed and held Astrid's hand.

"This girl shouldn't be alive, Hiccup, and she wasn't meant to survive," Juniper whispered. "Whoever did this to her did this on purpose, out of hatred. She wasn't intended for a quick death or suicide, but torture over many years. Her scars range from last month to birth."

Astrid shook and swallowed another wave of nausea.

"Please tell me that's it," Hiccup breathed.

"Aside from two broken ankles, yes."

"Gods. Will she be able to walk again?" Astrid asked. Juniper sighed again and rubbed her withered eyes.

"Only time will tell. We can barely expect she will wake, let alone walk again. But we are trying our best to keep her in a deep sleep so her injuries can begin to heal. Some herbs and potions will keep her in a dream state for a while. The most we can hope for is they will keep her asleep until the bruising and swelling of her face goes down so she can talk with ease."

Hiccup agreed. The swelling was so severe, it was hard to tell what facial features the girl had besides injury. He thanked Juniper and left with Astrid, where they looked over the ocean hand in hand. They didn't need to say much on the matter; both knew the stakes they had made. If the girl died, there would be no explanation into the Outcasts' intentions. But if she lived, there was no stopping the Outcasts from retaliating. It was a chilling realization that neither wanted to acknowledge.

* * *

><p>Toothless lurked in the shadows that night and silently climbed up Gothi's home. He sniffed the wooden roof, grunting and chirping as he did so. There was no dragon door to Gothi's home, but that didn't stop Toothless from sniffing the girl through the roof.</p>

He found her scent, the smell of smoke and blood. He sniffed again before looking up to Hiccup's home, where he knew his master and his wife were lying. He sniffed the girl one more time and bared his teeth before slinking back into the darkness.

14. Eyes Open, Eyes Shut

Happy Friday! Thank you to the new followers and favourites. New chapter every Fridayish!

* * *

><p>Chapter Fourteen: Eyes Open, Eyes Shut

Hiccup, nose wrinkled, walked down from the Great Hall through the frosty and hardened muck, disgruntled over the news that the patrols showed yet again, nothing. He shivered against the cold, wishing the snow would just fall already, and trudged over to his home.

The fact that the Outcasts disappeared would have made him happy years ago when they constantly bothered them, but after a simple bother became a fatal happenstance, their absence made him very uneasy. Three weeks had passed since finding the girl and yet nothing improved with her. Her bruising was blackened after the weeks, but the swelling had gone down to be replaced by starved skin stretching over tiny bones. She was not going to last through the week, and Hiccup knew that with a startling reality.

In his home, he sat at his writing table, charcoal and parchment set out in front of him, moving aside a decorative stirring spoon Astrid was admiring beforehand — it was the little things about his wife that made him smile to himself — and thought about Toothless. The Night Fury had been restless for weeks and flying had been difficult. The dragon did not seem to want to leave the island for more than a few minutes, and would only land by Gothi's home. Then, he somehow

broke his mechanical tail fin, which meant Hiccup had to spend a generous amount of time designing and building a new one to use.

He grabbed the tail fin that he had almost finished, and opened it repeatedly. It wasn't opening right just yet, so he tinkered with the bolts around the leather, trying to find a way to make the fin smoother than before.

"Am I getting fat?" Astrid asked quietly.

Hiccup looked up tiredly at his wife, who was turned sideways, naked save for furs around her shoulders. She had a hand patting her belly, trying to see if she was showing at all. Hiccup smiled warmly and abandoned his project to gather her in his arms, kiss her deeply, and hide in her hair.

"Not quite," he replied. Astrid sighed and frowned.

"Why do we have to wait," she groaned. "Why can't we just tell Stoick?"

Hiccup pulled away. "It's what Gothi said we should do. With your womb scarred, we have to be sure that our child is in there before we can announce anything."

Astrid sneered. "I know our child is there, I can feel it, yak-sack."

Hiccup laughed and squeezed her gently. "That being so, what Gothi wants, she gets."

"And what about what I want?" she asked determinedly. "I've been craving meat all day and there is none to eat."

Hiccup sighed and shook his head. "I've talked to Gobber about it, hopefully a hunt will happen once everyone gets back from the search."

Astrid rolled her eyes and pulled away from him, abandoning her furs and pulling on a loose shirt and trousers. "Why not get some yourself?"

"Toothlessâ€| is worrying me."

"It's that girl you brought back from Outcast Island," she retorted. "He smells death on her. And probably rot."

"Astrid, no," Hiccup moaned. "I'm going to check in with him. But I'll find you some meat, my love."

"You better," she warned. "If you think a hungry dragon is scary, wait till you see what I'm like."

Hiccup left and found Toothless by Gothi's house, lying on the threshold completely alert and tense.

"Hiccup," he rumbled in his head. "The girl sleeps."

Hiccup sat down and patted his dragon's head. "I'm more concerned with you, bud. You're not eating. You won't let me

fly."

"_Reasons_," Toothless spat. Hiccup blinked. The single word was not due to a lack of knowledge, but Toothless knew exactly what he was saying in that one word: leave me alone, back off, and don't ask questions. Hiccup furrowed his brow.

"Not everyone lives," Hiccup sighed.

"_No. Not good enough. Go inside. Go see._"

Annoyed, Hiccup stepped over the dragon and entered the home. Gothi was attending to the girl, holding her hand, eyes wide. Hiccup's throat caught. He expected to find the girl with the shorn red hair, bones protruding from under the skin, looking pale as death. He found her so, but he didn't expect her eyes to be open.

"_See_?" Toothless murmured to Hiccup.

Gothi looked up to Hiccup. She smiled quietly and motioned him over. Hiccup approached carefully, uncomfortable to see someone so sick still alive. He knew he should run to Stoick immediately, but he suddenly thought of the interrogations and the screaming and the yelling she would have to endure. So he crossed quietly and sat in Gothi's chair. The girl stared at him intensely with bright green eyes, one with skin blackened around it in a horrible bruise. Her jaw was bandaged; broken and healing, but broken nonetheless. So she just stared at Hiccup as he sat down.

Unsure of what to do, he stared at her awkwardly and licked his lips. He didn't know what to say. The little girl twitched her hand and opened it slowly, pleading silently for some sort of contact. Her skinny fingers shook, attached to a slender hand and a boney wrist, leading to an arm too frail to touch under furs and blankets to keep her healing body protected from the cold. He could only see her fingers and her face above her nose, and even then, he knew she was terrified. He reached forward and slid his hand under hers as if it was made of ash.

"I'm not going to hurt you," he whispered.

She gave his hand a squeeze and tears welled up in her eyes.

"Do you remember me?" he asked.

With great difficulty, she gave the tiniest nod, and Hiccup smiled.

"I'm gladâ€| you gave me a scare, little one."

The girl breathed as deep as she could through her nose and closed her eyes, tears spilling onto her cheeks. Hiccup felt a lump grow at the top of his throat, making his breath catch.

"It's okay, don't cry," Hiccup said quickly. "You're going to be alright."

She pulled her hand away sloppily and weakly brought it to her jaw, trying to get her fingers around the bandages around her face. Hiccup grabbed it gingerly and brought it down.

"You don't have to talk, not yet. You need to heal."

The girl mumbled under the bandages incoherently and kept her eyes fixed on Hiccup.

"You're going to be okay. I promise," Hiccup murmured delicately.

The girl blinked and nodded, breathing through her nose haggardly.

Hiccup smiled warmly and gave her hand the smallest of squeezes.
"Wanna see a Night Fury?"

* * *

><p>Astrid, hungry and bored, hauled the cooking pot to the fire and threw the last of the bones she had into the water, craving soup with the most violent passion. She was silent, thinking hard about everything: Hiccup and Toothless' bond, the child growing within her, the flight she and Stormfly had where she told Stormfly about the babyâ€|<p>

Stormfly didn't seem too keen about the news, actually. She, a narcissistic and stubborn dragon, snorted and waddled off when Astrid placed her hand on her snout and then to her belly. Juniper mentioned that the Nadder may react that way like a child would, that they would get jealous or upset that the attention would not be upon them. That being said, Astrid turned and looked up to the dragon door, where Snowdrop's tiny legs were dangling as she played with a Terrible Terror who she was nursing back to health from a sprained wing. Astrid left the soup to simmer and she climbed the ladder to Snowdrop.

"Astrid, do you fink Hammy is gonna get any bigger?" Snowdrop asked as she lifted the Terror into the air. The lizard croaked and wriggled around, a bandage hold his wing down. Astrid sat next to her and she played with her hair.

"Hammy?" Astrid asked, enthusiastic.

"Mhmm, is he gonna get like Stormfly or Toofless?" she asked again.

Astrid shrugged lightly. "Hammy is a runt, I don't know if he'll grow much more than he already has. He certainly is quite tiny."

"Yeah, well, so am I," Snowdrop argued. Astrid laughed. When she calmed, she hesitated before holding Snowdrop to her chest.

"Do you think I'd be a good mum?"

Snowdrop's hands slowed and she looked up at Astrid.

"Sure, why?"

Astrid leaned in and whispered in Snowdrop's ear the answer to the question. When she was finished, Snowdrop's little mouth opened and she smiled a huge toothy grin.

"Really?!" she squealed. "You and Hup are gonna make a baby?!"

Astrid coughed. "No, the baby is on their way, but soon."

Snowdrop hugged Astrid tightly. "Is it a secret?"

"Oh, yes," Astrid said with a false gasp. "No one must know until later. Okay? Not even Stoick. But, when it's time, I will let you tell him, okay?"

"Deal!" Snowdrop giggled. "I'm hungry."

Astrid blinked and shook her head, still amazed at how fast her sister would change her mind's pace from one thing to the next. She descended down the ladder and crossed past Hiccup's desk to pick up her new stirring spoon and stirred the soup for a time.

"Do you want some soup, Snowdrop?" Astrid called as the soup began to smell savoury and delightful.

"Not really," she whined. "I want bread."

"I will get you some bread, then. But I am going to have a huge bowl of soup for baby and me."

* * *

><p>It was getting dark outside. Hiccup was growing sleepy as Toothless kept his head still under the girl's hand. He was keeping her calm as Juniper pulled the blankets back and showed Hiccup the injuries after the girl consented. Not seeing anything private, Hiccup twisted his lips as the ugly bruises were shown and the bandages pulled away as Juniper explained all the bumps and bruises.</p>

"This is the most interesting," she murmured, lifting her shoulder gently to expose a nasty scar. "Look familiar?"

Hiccup nodded quickly. He recognized the white pearly marks of the jaws of a dragon. The teeth had gone deep, mangled her shoulder and arm, much like the shackle scars around her ankles and wrists, however much more noticeable.

"It's more prominent on her back."

The girl whimpered as they rested her back down. Juniper wiped her hand on her skirt and rested a hand by the girl's bandaged face. "She's healing a lot better than I had expected. Her breathing is already improving, her bones are already setting, some cuts have healed overâ€| much faster than I thought, but she's healthy."

She leaned over the girl. "That being said, we could try to free your jaw to check it so you can answer a few questions, if you want."

The girl nodded immediately and made a noise that was determined and prompt. However, Hiccup raised a hand and cleared his throat. "No. We should get Stoick here to hear what she has to say. Whatever we need to know, we need to hear once. I don't want to overexert

her."

Juniper paused before bowing her head. "As you wish. Feel free to take Toothless to find him. He was scouting the far side of the island for game."

Hiccup smiled and shook Juniper's hand, clasping her wrist and giving it one shake. He smiled at the girl and left the house quietly with Toothless trailing behind him.

"C'mon," Hiccup said gruffly, "let's get to the forge to put on one of your replacement tails."

Toothless snuffed at the ground and led the way, taking one look at Hiccup's house on the hill above them with one cat-like emerald eye, iris twitching.

* * *

><p>Hours passed. Years passed. Centuries passed. That wasn't possible, Astrid thought. Why, she could have sworn just moments ago she was at home. Or was that an age ago? Her vision was blocked, her perspective dark and dank. But she could have sworn her eyes were open a second ago. Her mind floated above her like a web in the wind and yet her body felt so heavy. She tried to move a hand, a finger, a nail, something to make sense to herself.</p>

She struggled to breathe. Sucking a jagged, pathetic puff of air, she felt herself for a moment. Her whole body ached as if she had fallen down the steepest mountain into a pile of dead, withered thorn bushes. Her nose burned with the smell of old and sawn pine, the floor of her home, and the side of her face was wet with something pooling from her mouth, crushed against the ground with the impossible weight of her own throbbing head. Something lingered on her tongue, the taste of disgusting meat or berry, something that didn't taste edible and burned her throat and stomach. She breathed out.

It felt like another turn of the wheel before she forced herself to breathe again. This time, she managed to twitch open one of her eyes and saw blurred shadows. In front of her face was the only discernable shape, the only one she could recognize: the ornate cooking spoon they had gotten at their wedding from an unknown patron. She stared at it in limbo and slowly realized with horrifying vividness that it was no longer a lovely yellowish colour, but a terrifying gray with blackened splotches. Syrup oozed out of it like ink from a squid and smelled acrid, overpowering the smell of the floor beneath her face. She grunted and coughed, pink foam spattering the spoon in front of her eyes. She remembered her father with foam coming from his mouth when he drank from the water the Outcasts had poisoned before he died.

Where was Snowdrop? The question screamed in her mind but she made no sound. She couldn't move, the poison coursing through her body like raw meat sliding over oil, slippery. Where was Hiccup? With the girl from Outcast island, the one from the place where the poison came from, someone who should be chained up. She needed to warn him, warn Stoick, the Outcast poison was back, it was in her body, her blood, herâ€|

Her child. She couldn't breathe anymore and faded into darkness.

She pushed against the blackness that was darker than night, refusing to leave, refusing to let the fire overcome her. She was running in the darkness, her arms flinging out, searching for her body. She spun around, whirling on her toes to see a dragon's egg in the distance, patterned with blue and yellow speckles. She ran to it, searching for anything in the dark. She reached out to touch it when the shell cracked. The break dissected the shell and blood spilled from the lines marking it. She snapped her hand back to her gut, crying out as unbearable pain, the fire of poison, attacked her stomach, dropping lower and lower into her pelvis, the flames eating her from the inside, killing her, destroying her, destroying everything. The egg exploded into a bright light and she slammed back into her body with a startling force.

She felt her eyes flutter and heard familiar voices around her. Juniper's panicked voice echoed in her head, Snowdrop cried to her left, matrons had hands on her everywhere. She was in Gothi's house.

"Wake her up!" Snowdrop cried. "Wake her up!"

"We're trying, baby," one woman said quickly. Others had Astrid's mouth opened, probing fingers forcing her throat open.

"Hup!" Snowdrop cried.

"I will send for him at once; send for Stoick. Tell him it's poison, tell him it's Astrid!"

Astrid was fading.

"The girl is bleeding again, Juniper."

"Let her bleed," was the dark reply. "Outcast piece ofâ€!"

Darkness consumed her again and she was back in the blackness, running, trying to find her body, not wanting to go. Her feet lost their footing and she felt herself carried up. There were stars above her, a beautiful cascade of the cosmos.

Calm filled her once-burning heart and she hovered under the stars as if floating on the calm sea. The water was warm and supported her whole body. Her hair unravelled and became sunlight, a beautiful beam of warmth from her head floating behind her. Her skin was clean and fresh and open, drinking in the air and the beautiful smell of the world above her. She knew it was Valhalla, and the realization didn't startle her, but gave her a sense of peace. She knew in her heart she wouldn't be hurt, free of pain, free of struggling to survive, always warm, not having to wear layer upon layers to keep your fingers from freezing off, living in the stars above her as a constellation. She felt herself lifted into the air, into the stars.

But something below her stopped her. The stars shuddered and she felt something tug against her in her lower back. It was as if a rope or a wire was tied around her spine at its base and refused to let her float up. She twisted to see was it was and saw herself in the water, back in Gothi's house. She was alone, the matrons long since given up. Her body was cold and lay in the shadows, Snowdrop's tears

already dried on her white skin. She had a memory in the back of her tranquil mind that she had fallen in the peak of the day and it was the dead of night. Hours had passed.

The stars didn't seem so beautiful as she noticed the bed beside her. Staring down at her as if a piece of wood in the ceiling, shining through the waters under Valhalla, she watched the girl leave her bed and walk. She wasn't injured. She had her head hung sinisterly, her face hidden to Astrid peering above. She looked at her dead body and cocked her head. Astrid noted that her ankles were fine, her stomach was no longer bleeding, and the bruises on her shoulders were fading quickly.

The stars shuddered as the girl placed a finger on Astrid's jaw, tracing it down to her chin, down her neck. The water started to ripple, the rope began to pull, Astrid felt the burning in her gut. She knew that girl was evil, an Outcast planted within Berk to hurt the people, the poison found in their home only after she had arrived.

That little girl. That little demon. Astrid wanted to scream at her to get her filthy hands off her body, to give her some peace, to let her go. The anger was so great that she suddenly felt pain in her gut, and her body in the water moved for just a moment. Astrid realized with a sudden urgency that she could get back to her body, she didn't have to die, she didn't have to leave everyone behind! She could wait!

But the girl had other plans. Astrid saw her reach over to the counter next to Astrid's head, prodding a knife the girl had stolen and stashed under her pillow. She picked up the blade and weighed it in her hand. Astrid screamed and reached for the water, making her real body twitch again. She had to get back, she had to stop the girl.

The girl held the knife over Astrid's body and stopped for a moment before she turned around slowly and looked up at Astrid through the water, making eye contact with her under Valhalla. How? She was dead, she was floating before the afterlife and the girlâ€| was _looking at her. _Astrid screamed again, reaching for the water as the girl smirked and turned back, driving the blade straight into Astrid's body, sending Astrid flying into an endless void, her ears howling as if a dragon was roaring, beckoning her, welcoming her.

* * *

><p>Hiccup and Stoick, along with the rest of the hunting party, arrived around Gothi's house as dawn kissed the shores of Berk. The matrons met them outside and met Hiccup and Stoick. Four of them grabbed onto Hiccup, who tried to shove past them, shrieking at them. Two found Stoick and told him about the poison. One met with the matron they sent to find them and told her the news that Astrid could not be saved. When Hiccup overheard that, he found himself in front of two matrons, forgetting that he had bruised three matrons and broken the ribs of the fourth to get there.</p>

Hiccup grabbed onto one of the matrons, demanding what had happened, demanding the truth that no one was brave enough to tell.

When Juniper revealed herself, everyone watched as she dragged the

Outcast girl out of the house by her hair, dragging her through the frost and snow, and hurled her at Stoick's feet after punching her in the jaw twice, breaking it again. The little girl hit the ground but made no sound, blood smeared over her hands. Juniper spat at the girl who did not look up or ask for forgiveness. Stoick seized her and demanded her imprisoned, the blood enough for Hiccup to run into Gothi's home before anyone could stop him. Toothless roared into the air and Hiccup could not hear the words he was trying to send him. Stormfly was on the roof already, looking down, frozen in shock.

He found Astrid in a bed, her face pale and cold, her chest pierced with a dagger, blood blossomed over her breasts and dripped onto the floor. She had been stabbed so many times, the puncture wounds marking her neck, her collar, her shoulders, her chest, and her thighs. Blood pooled everywhere and the smell of it wafted into Hiccup's face. He saw the crimson footprints of the girl that tainted the Gothi's floor and found himself weak in the knees, stumbling, reaching out to her. He slipped in her blood which had soaked through the mattress and collapsed onto her. He saw the blood on his own chest, felt it on his cheek, tasted it on his lips. A shaking hand rested itself on her forehead, smoothing back her hair, marking the white skin with red blood.

"Astrid?" he asked. It was as if he was asking her in the morning to wake up to the sun hitting the frosty mud of Berk. But Astrid's face didn't move this time, nor would it ever again. Hiccup placed a gentle hand on her abdomen as if to keep himself from hurting her dead body, and found himself hysterical, crying, feeling his fingers dig into her belly and feeling no more life under his hand.

15. Flames

Posted a day early just for you guys, who seem really adamant on having it. _

* * *

><p>Chapter Fifteen: Flames

Hiccup didn't sleep that night, nor the next. He stayed in bed and stared at the ceiling with Snowdrop snuggled beside him until she woke up to eat with Gothi, the tiny girl quiet and pale. She cried every night after she realized Astrid would not come back, and didn't eat anything unless Juniper and Gothi forced her to nibble at anything. Hysterical crying, random screaming, long periods of monotonous silence plagued Snowdrop's little body day and night. Hiccup could only imagine her grief, trying to control his own.

The villagers avoided him to give him space to breathe; the Dragonlings did not study and the dragon riders could only look at him from a distance. Snotlout and Wormha tried to get his attention once which had only resulted in nothing. The twins did not joke but kept their eyes to the ground. Fishlegs stayed with Stormfly, who had refused to eat since she found Astrid's body. Hiccup knew she would never eat again. Toothless didn't speak to him in his mind, but kept his gaze out over the ocean watching the sun rise and set. Only at night would the Night Fury crawl into the house and into Hiccup's bed to warm Snowdrop and Hiccup as they tried to sleep, comforting thoughts whispering through his mind into Hiccup's without proving

helpful.

One morning, after Toothless left to stare over the ocean as the villagers prepared the boat for Astrid's send-off, Hiccup sat up from his bed. He ran his hand over the empty space in the furry blankets where Astrid would have been before he got up, got dressed, made his way around the pink stain on the floor in front of the hearth, and entered the frigid air. He knew Astrid's body would be burned today, giving her physicality the sort of peace he only wished she would get.

He limped down the hill. His leg was stiff like wood, his back hurting immensely, his eyes heavy as if weights were tied to his eyelashes. His chapped lips froze in the air with every step he took. There were no more tears to shed, not now. He avoided looking at the ocean where his wife was, the boat being lined with clean fabric and scented oils and some harvested crops. Instead, he trudged up the hill to the Great Hall. It took him time to heave open the door and walk down the side staircase deep into the ground where the dungeon keep was.

His legs did the walking for him, not his mind, as he found himself getting closer and closer to the girl who had murdered his wife and child. He found the cell, the only one with life in it after the peace Berk had momentarily. The girl was curled up on the floor in the corner, her dirty arms holding her knees to her chest, her head hidden. She shivered. She wasn't wearing much, just the nightgown the matrons had dressed her in that had since been stained with blood. Her back was against one of the rough stone walls that were speckled with holes; windows to outside, taunting and inviting, with a view of the ocean and no way out.

Stopping in front of the bars, he watched the girl tremble on the floor and saw she had fresh bruises, new lash marks. Hiccup wasn't upset by the sight. He simply watched her shiver until she sensed his presence and looked up, her jaw hanging at an awkward angle and her mouth drooling. She sat up and slinked away from him, pressing against the wall as he gouged her body with his accusing eyes.

Hiccup shook his head as his eyes stung and his mouth twisted painfully. A strange noise croaked out of his throat, strangled and cold and dead.

The girl didn't move. She didn't make expression or movement. She merely looked back at him with a green eye. Hiccup leaned against the bars with his forehead, begging for an internal peace he was hoping for but was not happening. He didn't want to speak to the girl and yet he had so many questions to ask (and fists to throw). The hatred came in bouts while the confusion came in waves and the misery plowed his ribcage over and over with every aching and gods-forsaken heartbeat. It became very hard to breathe suddenly, and he found himself clutching the bars to the cell desperately. He threw his hands back against his eye sockets, cramming his fists as hard as they could against his vision as if it would wake him up or something.

He growled and threw a fist into one of the cell bars, cracking one knuckle painfully and sending pain shooting up his arm. He liked the distraction even though he cursed and stumbled back, holding his fist

to his chest. He looked at the girl once more before rushing down the hall, desperate to get away from the creature that ruined his world.

When he made it to the cold and fresh air of the island, Toothless whispered in his mind as gently as possible.

_ "Snowdrop wishes to say goodbye", _ he said delicately. Hiccup closed his eyes and began walking home. Toothless slinked towards him halfway there in the middle of the road as the last of the villagers made their way to the beach for the funeral. The Night Fury stood on one side of the road while Hiccup stumbled to a stop on the other. He didn't look up as Toothless made an inquiring coo, trying to see if Hiccup was alright. When he shoved past his dragon, his answer was clear.

_ "Hiccup?" _ he asked feebly.

"Please," Hiccup said hoarsely. "Not now."

Toothless snorted against the ground sadly as he heard his master's metal leg squeak until it could no longer be heard.

Hiccup made his way to the beach. The ritual was about to start and Hiccup allowed his legs do the walking and his mind to go numb. He found Snowdrop at Gothi's house and picked her up. He sat her on his hip like Astrid would do so Snowdrop could keep her face warm in her hair. But Hiccup didn't have long hair, so Snowdrop's tears flowed freely as they stepped onto the gravelly beach to pay their last respects.

The villagers hushed and turned to watch Hiccup limp forward, pale and eyes sunken carrying Snowdrop towards their loved one, clutching onto each other for dear life. Snowdrop and Hiccup, both wearing thick cotton under their leather clothing, shivered as they made their march through the crowd toward the boat. Neither of them looked up to see Snotlout look out to sea, his eyes swollen and red. The twins held onto each other's arms, both stoic after bouts of rage-filled anger. Fishlegs stayed at the back with Meatlug close to him to keep his composure. Stormfly, however, was at the boat, her head nuzzled against her rider, trying to warm the long-cold body within.

When Hiccup saw her over the lip of the boat, his heart stopped painfully. She was redressed in the riding suit he had made her that year, the blue accents standing out beautifully. Her arms had been crossed over her chest and her hands had been painted to hide the bruises and bloody fingers. A hand-axe was under one hand and in the other was the Night Fury scale that symbolized her marriage to Hiccup. He felt Stormfly's horn under his clothes dig into his skin and found a sort of comfort in having it there. Her hair was braided again and her circlet placed on her head one final time. An engagement, a wedding, and a funeral.

Snowdrop looked down for a minute before reaching out one shaky hand, her body shaking with sobs. Hiccup noted her bravery, at how hard she was trying to not cry in front of everyone, but by gods, the pain in her face was heartbreaking. He reached forward until Hiccup let her down so she could put her hand on Astrid's cheek. A squeak left her chest as she ran two of her fingers through Astrid's bangs. Hiccup

heard the village suck in a breath simultaneously at the sight of Snowdrop on the tips of her toes, reaching desperately over the lip of the boat to touch her older sister's face one last time.

"Say hi to mummy," Snowdrop said to her, "and papa. Okay?"

Snowdrop's body convulsed into a large sob but she sucked it down and wiped her nose clean with the sleeve of her coat.

"And I'll stay warm like you always said, and brush my hair, too. Okay?"

Hiccup couldn't see anymore, a sea in his eyes. He looked up over the ocean as Snowdrop clutched the boat for a few more moments before she finally broke down.

"I don't wanna let go of the boat," she cried, "because then she'll be gone forever."

Stoick stepped from the crowd and leaned next to her while Hiccup kept his gaze away lest he break.

"Come here, wee lass," he whispered into her ear as he wrapped one arm around her. Snowdrop sobbed and gasped as Stoick pulled her away from the boat, cradling her as he took her away to comfort her far from the smell of death.

There was a tense moment before Hiccup turned and knelt next to Astrid. He saw her face, how they had painted it to look alive and healthy. Her riding suit held her torn body together and he thought it was what she would have wanted. He reached in and rubbed a thumb over her eyebrow, over the thin blonde hair and the scar that severed it. He remembered softly when the Skrill attacked months before, how its lightning struck the forge and the debris flew into her head. Now a small scar. He marvelled at how strong she had been in the short life she had. Strong, up until days before.

He knelt his head down as he picked up one of her hands. Unbuttoning his furs, he slid her hand within, her cold fingertips pressed to his heart as if the heat from his body and the beats of his heart would spurn hers to start again. It was so cold, he tried to keep his breathing even, but he let the reality sink in as deep as that cold hand pierced his soul, his spirit. He kissed her chilled lips and tears dripped onto her face below him like a gentle rain, warm and alive.

He pressed his forehead to hers and let his body racking with those damned sobs.

"You," Hiccup began as if the words tore his heart with every syllable, "are the beauty of my morningâ€| You are my only and my chosenâ€| I will love you even though you are gone, after our dragons have taken flight to Valhalla and our bones are distant memories... I will always remain all that I am and I will cherish you for your entirety forevermore. Always and eternal. A-Always, Astrid."

He kissed her twice more as his sobs became audible, his wedding vows making the entire village stay eerily silent.

"It's time to go," he choked. "I love youâ€¦ I love you."

He ripped himself away from her and grabbed the head of the boat his both hands, pushing his weight and every emotional ounce of his being into Astrid's send-off. The boat scratched against the gravel and sliced into the water as Hiccup pushed even harder, letting his tears freeze to his face and the frozen water soak through his pants. The ripples made it to his waist before the boat pulled away from his hands and floated out. He stood there and watched to make sure the boat floated safe and sound. Stormfly jumped off the beach and while everyone thought she would go after the boat, she spat fire into it, setting it aflame in a dazzling array of the warmest colours anyone had seen in so long.

Hiccup watched the boat burn for only a few moments before someone grabbed his shoulder. Hiccup turned to shove that person back, but Stoick grabbed Hiccup's fist and pulled his son to his chest and crushed him. And before Hiccup could throw his defenses, he let himself scream into his dad's collar as the smoke hit his nose. And he screamed until he couldn't make any more noise.

The girl heard Hiccup scream and knew the boat had been lit. She smelled the smoke in the distance and remained passive, lying in the cell awaiting her punishment, glad the body was burning in dragon fire. She rested her head on the stone wall behind her and let her eyes fall shut, a smile tugging at her broken mouth.

Stoick pulled Hiccup out of the water and somehow they made it to the Great Hall. Hiccup only returned to himself loosely by the time he was sitting in front of the fire, the sun already setting. Stoick, Gobber, Spitelout, Fishlegs, Juniper, and various other high status men and women sat at the long table and watched Stoick stand, still wet from fetching Hiccup, and threw an object on the table. A stirring spoon clunked and rolled over the wood, making people murmur. The wood was blackened in a bizarre fashion.

"Juniper and the other matrons have told me that they think this was the weapon that took away our young Astrid," Stoick said gruffly. "We need to find out who and how."

Fishlegs reached forwardly, the sadness from the beach still under his eyes like heavy curtains, and looked at the spoon with a sharp eye. "Poison is an obvious culprit here, although I'm stumped as to the type or potency of it."

Juniper coughed. "Fast. Very potent. Three hours passed before we could no longer help her. Then thatâ€¦ girl did her part."

Hiccup gulped and kept his eyes on the table.

"Perhaps you should leave," Spitelout said as comfortingly as possible.

Hiccup glared. "No. My wife was fucking murdered, and I'm not leaving until we know why."

A tense silence rested on the table before Fishlegs cleared his throat. "The carvings on the spoon look to be of Eastern make."

Stoick grunted again and Gobber looked over at him. "They came to the ceremony. There was that one lass."

"Cauli," Hiccup noted. "The brutish woman who challenged Astrid and another girl to a fight for a spot at my wedding. Her tribe is from the East."

"That wouldn't make a lot of sense," Spitelout remarked. "She made a pact with you. Her clan owes us allegiance."

"I guess she broke it," Hiccup replied darkly.

Fishlegs leaned in. "The carvings are from the Eastern tribes, but the poison is something I have never seen. They may have something like this, but I think we would have known about it beforehand."

"Aye," Gobber added, "if there is anything I know about poison, it's that it's a cowardly move and an Outcast move at that."

"We've already exhausted resources to find the Outcasts," Stoick explained. "Their island has been destroyed and that rock never sustained anything other than shit and dirt. They're gone and we have no way of finding them."

Hiccup looked up. "The girl is still alive. We can ask her."

"Her jaw is broken, and if she even negotiates with us, there's too much bad blood after what she's done."

"I never said we had to be kind to her to get her to talk," Hiccup replied. The table went quiet for another few moments.

Stoick groaned and rubbed his eyes. "We've all had a taxing day. Spitelout, I want you to send word to the Eastern Islands to send the chief under the alliance treaty. If they pose a problem, I want them on our turf."

"Right," Spitelout grunted.

"We will interrogate the girl in the coming weeks. In that time, no trade is to be bought unless it is from trader Johann himself."

Hiccup raised a hand. "There is someone I want to find."

Stoick nodded his head. "And that may be?"

"Her name is Rose," Hiccup began. "She came to our wedding, fought with Astrid for my hand, and then bonded Toothless and I. It's proven to be very useful and if things are going to take a turn for the worst, I want us to have everything possible. Our forge is too outdated and Berk is central to most dragon nests. Find her, we find help."

Stoick shook his head at that. "That girl is just a child."

Hiccup sat up straighter. "Since Rose bonded Toothless and I, I have been able to have constant contact with him, been stronger and healthier. And there have been times where I dreamt into the minds of

other dragons. The Skrill showed me that there are other dragons out there under the control of tyrannical masters who try to break them. The only reason I didn't die was because the dragon forced himself not to. And she can talk to these other dragons somehow, I want to know how and why and what's going on with these dragons. We're going to need all the help we can get if something bigger ever happens."

His father ran his fingers through his tangled beard before Fishlegs spoke up. "And dragons are supposed to be peaceful unless agitated. The Skrill had no reason to attack, so this makes sense. Which makes me very concerned."

"The Skrill was sent to kill me," Hiccup said. "Then, poison is brought into my home andâ€¦ killsâ€¦ It was meant for me. They wereâ€¦ trying toâ€¦ killâ€¦ _me_."

The realization hit him as he said it. The room seemed to shift as he noticed how the dots were connecting. And no one questioned it, it made too much sense.

"Why would someone try to kill you?" Juniper asked.

Hiccup licked his lips. "The Skrill called me the Saviour. The dragons also know that Berk is a haven for dragons and I am next in line for the chiefdom. Take me out, the dragons have no Saviour and no haven."

Silence. Stoick flicked his eyes up to Gobber and Spitelout. "After you send word, I want Snotlout and the twins to search for this Rose woman. Find trader Johann and ask for his routes. Find her that way. Then, I want patrols doubled. Word of Astrid's funeral will spread and I don't want whoever is endangering us to take that news as an opportunity. And I want that girl kept alive so we can get information from her as soon as possible."

Most stood and began work on their tasks. Stoick placed a hand over Hiccup's and gave it a squeeze. "Go home. You can be a chief later. You'veâ€¦ had a bad day."

"Master of understatements," Hiccup spat, suddenly hateful. He threw his blankets down and stormed out of the building. He knew he should have been satisfied with the news that searches were underway, but that didn't stop him from wanting the result immediately. Even so, it wouldn't bring Astrid back. He focused on walking home to meet Snowdrop.

He found her in his bed already, her body buried in the furs and blankets. She always slept on Astrid's side; the smell comforted her and Hiccup, which meant they had to share the bed but the two of them had no issue with that. The moment his foot made a sound, Snowdrop peeked out of the blanket.

"She's gone," she sniffled. "I saw the boat turn around the island."

Hiccup bit his lip and said nothing as he grabbed dry clothes and put them on in another room. As he changed he saw the scar the Skrill left behind and ran his finger over it thoughtfully. Astrid had helped stitch this shut, he recalled. The Skrill tried to kill him,

but it also spurned their wedding. He clutched the Nadder spike around his neck and breathed a deep breath before pulling a sweater on and returning to the room.

He squatted by the fire and tossed two more logs into the flames until Snowdrop dropped from the bed and crawled next to him, crawling under one of his arms and into his lap, snuggling her face in his chest.

"Hup?" she asked quietly as Hiccup stared into the flames. Hiccup made a sound to continue. "Astridâ€œ told me about the baby."

Hiccup's stomach turned as the heat from the flames burned his eyes. He wrapped his arms around Snowdrop and clutched her tightly.

"It's just you and me, Snow."

"Are we going to be okay?"

"Yes," he breathed into the child's hair comfortingly, trying to convince himself, but failing horribly.

* * *

><p>He remained still until Snowdrop had long fallen asleep, running his hand through her hair and humming deep in his throat to comfort himself. Stiffly, he lifted himself to his feet with Snowdrop cradled in his arms, carefully lying her down among the nest of furs on Astrid's side. The girl nuzzled into the fur with a deep sigh, her eyes fluttering and her body melting into the bed warmly. Hiccup placed the blankets over her and sat on the edge of the bed.</p>

He looked out the window across from him to the night sky and the ocean beneath, hoping to see some sort of trace of Astrid, a single flame or a puff of smoke, but the closest thing to Astrid was snoring softly behind him. He held his breath as he stood up and left his room, going to the main room and sitting against a wall, any wall, holding his knees, and allowing his body to tear apart in every way as tears and sobs wracked and raged through him like the frontlines meeting each other on the battlefield. He bit his wrist as he let himself go, sinking into the floor as all the water drained from him into the wood beneath his body.

He cried for all the flights they would never have. Flying above the clouds where no one would see them, kissing on the back of Toothless who would have flown true, diving until their hearts threatened to jump out of their backs. He cried for the fights they wouldn't have, the punches she would have thrown and the kisses he would have given after. He cried for their family now broken too soon, too late, never, forever. He let his body convulse as he forced every emotion out of his body, allowing the rage and sadness and grief to pour out of him like a waterfall over the highest peak off the coast of Berk.

He cried until he cried no more, until he simply lie on the floor numb and cold and lost in the dark. Hours had passed, maybe years, before his body was too sore to stay still. He sat up and felt his way over the cracks of the wall back to his bedroom, back to the warmth of the fire that had burned down. He tossed another log in and

heard Snowdrop stir.

"Astrid?" she groaned. Hiccup raised himself and leaned next to her.
"Hup?"

"Yeah?"

"I have to peeâ€œ!" she mumbled. Hiccup sighed. He pulled Snowdrop out of bed and took her to the front door. There was a chamber pot next to it and some leaves, so he left Snowdrop to her business by going around the corner to the hall.

He heard her wriggle out of her pants and balance herself, pee, then grab a leaf before she huffed.

"You okay in there?" Hiccup asked through exhaustion. Snowdrop sighed again.

"Yeah."

"I can help you if you want."

"No fanks," she said quickly. She pulled up her pants and found Hiccup. "I thought I heard Stormfly outside."

Hiccup looked up and narrowed his eyes with another sigh. "Crawl back into bed. I should go check on her."

Snowdrop trudged off and Hiccup pulled on a fur vest and his boots to step outside. He shivered against the air, snow sprinkling down. Stormfly hadn't been well during the funeral procession, and now that it was done, Hiccup felt he owed it to the beast to care for her or at least check on her. Dragon grief was noted as being one of the more powerful emotions to the creatures, and Hiccup could only imagine the pain she felt.

"Stormfly?" he called quickly, stomping around the house under the moonlight. He heard the Nadder before he saw her, and she was pacing back and forth with distressed chortles and croaks burping from her throat. Her eyes were wild and her wings twitched as Hiccup approached cautiously.

"Hey, girl, easy," he said gently. He put out his hands and the dragon reared her head. Toothless jumped between them and stared at Hiccup alarmingly.

Hiccup, Toothless said quickly. _Wait._

"I need her to calm down, bud," Hiccup replied. "She'll hurt herself."

No, I must speak first.

Hiccup frowned. "Toothless, seriously â€œ"

Hiccup!

"No, you can wait! Stormfly, calm down!"

I can tell you what her worry is if you let me, Toothless

growled.

Hiccup stepped around his dragon with a wrinkled nose. "Please, let's keep things simple tonight, okay? I don't want to deal with damned riddles or rhymes or â€""

Astrid stepped from around Stormfly and made Hiccup jump out of his skin. He stumbled back and felt a sharp pain in his ankle. He fell onto his back, his eyes fixed on the creature that floated towards him. Its skin was white as frosty wheat, its long hair in stiff, frozen tendrils like a sea monster. Blue eyes glinted in the moonlight and off its leather scrappy clothing. Strips of fabric hung from its appendages, and it looked at Hiccup. Toothless and Stormfly backed away nervously as Hiccup began to hyperventilate, his heart shrieking and his mind going dark. It couldn't be her, she burned, she bled, she was gone, gone!

"Hup?" a tiny voice called behind him. Snowdrop rounded the corner of the house and found him sitting on the ground, mouth open, terrified. She looked up at the figure across from them and blinked.

"J-Just fell, get back inside," Hiccup wheezed. But Snowdrop stepped forward to the figure and looked up at it slowly. Hiccup blanched when he found out Snowdrop could see it too.

When she jumped forward and hugged the ghost around the knees, Hiccup realized that Astrid wasn't as dead as he thought.

16. Phoenix

Happy Friday! Many of you have asked, and I post a chappie every week - I usually aim for Thursday or Friday. Thank you for all your comments; they mean a lot to me. _

* * *

><p>Chapter Sixteen: Phoenix

She hurled through the void, stars blinding her and voices chasing her. She whirled around, not sure where she was or how she got there, the image of the Outcast girl stabbing her etched into her mind.

She flipped over and over, thoughts racing through her head. She didn't think death would be like this, she thought she had a chance to get to her body, she needed to find it and find Hiccup and Snowdrop and tell them about the Outcast girl, that she was a murderer, healed and ready to kill!

Astrid flew onward, clawing at the air around her trying to stabilize herself. Suddenly, a severe pain hit her in the chest, sharp and hot. She held onto that mark, but another pain sliced into her shoulder, making her scream. Again and again, sharp pains stabbed through her chest, her shoulders, her thighs. They filled her with heat, with anger, with feeling.

She slammed to a halt, an instantaneous stillness exploding through her. Her body hurt in every which way, a blistering heat coursing through her veins. Blurry visions hit her dry eyes, pried open for ages. She focused on lines above her, which turned into slats, which

turned into wood, which became a ceiling. Gothi's ceiling.

The Outcast girl loomed over her, a soft and somewhat comforting face hovering above her. Her fingers were red and the knife was drenched. Astrid tried to breathe, the urge to panic overwhelming. Only a whisper of breath left her lips. Somehow it was enough. Astrid couldn't move anything, not her eyes nor body, but her mind was awake and alert. The girl smiled softly and rested the knife to the side.

Wake? a voice echoed in her head, loud and startling and bouncing off every which way. Astrid would have cringed if she could, but her body remained deathly still.

What? Astrid asked in her mind, thinking the word immediately as if she could make the word heard on her lips. Who's there?

Bond, was the simple reply. Astrid thought for a moment, staring uncontrollably at the girl above her.

"The voice you hear," the girl whispered with a surprisingly beautiful voice that sounded too old for her age, "is Stormfly."

Wait, can you hear me? Astrid asked quickly, trying to find her body but failing, breathing the tiniest breaths she had ever breathed, the pain ebbing through her. The stab wounds laid open and bare to the cool air made her writhe in her mind.

"I can hear your dragon," the girl responded. "She and I are going to save you."

Astrid had a million question rush through her head, and she felt Stormfly's presence as if she were a person looming over her shoulder confounded and trying to keep up. But the thought of seeing Snowdrop, how she wailed as they tore her tiny body away from her corpse, made her abandon every thought save for one.

How? she thought clearly and distinctly.

The girl smiled again, and Stormfly entered her vision, looking over her with a worried eye. "Blood and venom," she said quickly. "The moment I knew you were poisoned, I called to Stormfly. When the matrons gave up, and after healing fast and in a way I can't explain at this time, I left my bed and Stormfly granted me a willful dose of bloody dragon venom, the secretion much different than an attack venom. I would apologize for the stab wounds, but they should heal properly if â€œ"

She heard voices above her and looked up cautiously.

"I hear a noise. Stormfly, outside!" she said quietly. She grabbed Astrid's face and looked into Astrid's seemingly vacant eyes. "You cannot move yet, your spirit and body are still unconnected. When I saw you hovering toward Valhalla, I knew I had a window of time. It was merely a first step."

More voices sounded, closer and louder. The girl cursed and continued even faster. "With Hiccup, it was different."

Astrid's mind clicked together, a realization hitting her like a battering ram. Rose, she thought. It's Rose. You're Rose. The girl from our wedding, we fought together against Cauli, you bonded Hiccup.

"With Hiccup, I bonded him when he was alive, which didn't need as many steps as you're about to endure. He merely had to make a bond, you will have to go through a wee bit more. I bonded him to make the Saviour stronger, but I am doing this to keep you alive. Berk will hold a funeral for you when they can, and your body will not deteriorate, but will not heal. Stormfly's blood is supporting you, but she will have to give you more than her blood for it to work. Your insides have been burned by Outcast Orchid, a plant Stoick knows not of, so you will need that time to heal and the fire to give you a leg-up."

A voice floated through the ceiling. "I see them, the dragons are hereâ€œ! Gods, Hiccup."

Rose bit her lip. "Trust me, Astrid, I know it's hard for you, but I can't let you die knowing what's coming Berk's way."

What? Rose, what? What's going on?

Rose shook her head as someone descended the steps. "They're going to deal with me in a way even I don't know, so when you burn, you have to get to Hiccup. I will worry about me, you focus on staying dead. Stormfly is here for you and knows what to do. Just trust me"â€œ"

"YOU_!" Juniper's voice shrieked from the doorway as the dragons landed outside. She crossed the room and grabbed Rose by the mouth, lifting her boney body off the floor by her jaw. Rose cried out and tried to speak, but with a bloodcurdling crack, Juniper dislocated Rose's jaw. "I knew you couldn't be trusted!"

No! Astrid screamed internally. Rose, no! Stormfly, you have to stop her!

No, Stormfly replied frightfully, Spirit Weaver said not to. The statement made Astrid even more frantic. But she couldn't move. She was absolutely still and cold. Rose was dragged away by her hair, one more look between them that horrified Astrid to the core. What would they do to her?

There was a tense moment of silence, the room settling as voices yelled outside. Only when she heard the familiar sound of an inconstant footstep, one foot and one squeak, did she know Hiccup was running to her. It broke her heart when she saw him stumble forward, his eyes open and red and filled with terrified tears. He approached haggardly until he slipped in something wet and slick, falling onto her chest and making a sound Astrid had never heard him make. There was blood on his chest, on his face, and he looked into her eyes. She hoped he could see her spirit behind her dead eyes. He crumbled and said her name with one breath. Then, he placed a hand on her abdomen, which made her heart shatter into a million pieces. Her spirit may have been there, but the babyâ€œ! she didn't know. She let herself stare, chanting Rose's words in her mind to give her some peace.

They had cleaned her up during the longest days of her life. They placed her back in her riding suit, Juniper overriding Olga against the wedding gown. They painted her face and covered her wounds. It still hurt immensely, but the moment they were concealed, she felt the raw flesh rub against the bandage in a pain that was disgusting. At least she wasn't rotting.

Finally, at the boat, her eyes closed, she could only hear the ceremony. When she felt Snowdrop's hand â€“ the only petite hand in her world â€“ her spirit awoke and slammed against her shell of a body, trying to find a way to hold her and tell her she was alright. But she listened to her small words and felt her heart ache with every painstakingly-slow heartbeat.

Love, Stormfly said, thinking sweet thoughts into Astrid's mind, trying to comfort her as Snowdrop's voice became distant.

She smelled Hiccup before she heard him. She felt his hands on hers, her wrist pulling from her body, her frigid hands pressed against the bear skin of his chest. She felt his heartbeat beneath his shirt and the sobs that pounded his body into devastation. He kissed her face and tears spattered her cheeks.

"You are the beauty of my morningâ€œ!" Hiccup whispered against her face. She recognized the vows instantly and listened to every word. "You are my only and my chosenâ€œ I will love you even though you are gone, after our dragons have taken flight to Valhalla and our bones are distant memories... I will always remain all that I am and I will cherish you for your entirety forevermore. Always and eternal. A-Always, Astrid."

He kissed her twice.

I love you, my Hiccup, Astrid thought weakly. _I'm here, I love you, I'm here._

"It's time to go," he choked. "I love youâ€œ I love you."

Hiccupâ€œ

But he was gone. Her boat began to move and finally, she remembered Rose's words. She prayed this would work as she felt the soft ripples of the boat beneath her. There was a brief reprieve as she floated.

What if this didn't work? What if Rose did it wrong? What if she floated away until nothingness consumed her, until her weak body finally gave up, eons until she was asleep forever?

The fire hit her body, and the pain was the most excruciating she had ever felt in her entire life. She burned and burned and her spirit screamed. She desperately tried to claw at her skin, feeling as if it was melting away. The bandages burnt to floating ash and the wounds began to sting as they pulled and tore and forced themselves shut, new skin bursting forward like a blossoming flower, healing everything. It took time for her whole body to glue itself back together, the boat burning and suffocating smoke attacking her face. It hit her nose, filled her lungs, and she coughed.

She coughed! Her body moved with that one movement, and she centred herself in her suffering. She felt the shell of her body, how it felt hot and fluid, forcing her spirit into the empty spaces like molten metal into one of Hiccup's moulds. Her fingers twitched. She searched for more spaces to fill. Her eyes fluttered open. The fire filled her and with that fire, things became clearer. Her eyes burned into new sights, her throat burned with a new voice. Her heart pounded strongly between her lungs, and the searing heat filled her organs.

She made a sound, a silent shriek as the holes in her stomach closed, the infections burning away, the poison smouldering and simmering away and out of her roaring veins. The boat creaked beneath her as she found her bones and moved an arm, and the wood gave out beneath her.

The claws of the frozen sea seized her, grabbed at her riding suit and surrounding her in a frigid prison. She couldn't breathe, but the cold shocked the fire within her to burn harder. She snapped her legs around, pushing herself to the surface. Her unfamiliar arms dragged her upward until her face broke the water. She sucked in a huge breath of delicious air into her new lungs, the air whistling into her and rushing out. She coughed and gasped and looked at the stars above her.

She breathed and treaded the water. It was night, dark and long after her funeral. How long had she burned? That didn't matter. She pushed herself towards the shore nearby and when she felt the sand under her, she crawled onto a soft shore, collapsing into the dirt. She felt in in her mouth, grating against her teeth, and disgusting grains of sand in her mouth. She loved it. Tears filled her eyes gratefully as she felt herself sink into the sand. She was exhausted, and she had a ways yet to go.

She lied in the sand for thousands of waves washing against her calves until she got her arms beneath her to force herself up. Her hair fell out of her braid as she crawled forward.

Stormfly landed in front of her quietly and sniffed her with worry.
Wake.

The sound was alien, the words of an ancient voice softly vibrating through her head. Hiccup had always tried to explain the voice, the bond. He had said that it was like a thought or a dream that wasn't her own, but different and comforting. Astrid rolled onto her back. She reached up to her beloved Nadder meekly, the creature that saved her life that crouched next to her, and wrapped her hand in the reins. Stormfly hauled her up, using her weaker wing to push Astrid into her saddle before leaving the ground and jumping into the air.

* * *

><p>When they landed, Toothless met them, conversing with Stormfly hectically. Astrid slumped off Stormfly, her knees buckling under her weight, but she remained standing. She wasn't entirely present, but her body could move if she focused hard enough. That was an improvement from being dead, she thought. She just wanted to find her sister, her husband, and Rose. Her heart was pounding as she noticed her house in the dark " how? It was too dark for her to see! but

her eyes could see through the heavy darkness of the overcast night sky. The sight of her home made her want to run forward and crash through the wall of the house to show Hiccup she was alive and "p>

"Stormfly?" Hiccup's voice made Astrid's eyes flick up, but she couldn't find the will through her exhaustion to step forward after all her thoughts. Stormfly, unsure of what to do, began moving, trying to cover Astrid as Toothless met with Hiccup.

"I need her to calm down, bud," Hiccup said to his dragon. "She'll hurt herselfâ€| Toothless, seriously! No, you can wait! Stormfly, calm down! â€|Please, let's keep things simple tonight, okay? I don't want to deal with damned riddles or rhymes or â€""

Astrid, in a fit of homesickness and longing paired with her famous stubborn determination, forced herself around Stormfly. Her whole body burned in that one movement and she almost lost her balance. Hiccup jerked upright and fell back. Astrid moved forward, desperate to comfort him but her body aching. Gods, he was so pale. He was going to make his own heart stop out of fright!

"Hup?"

Snowdrop's voice froze Astrid like a wild wind. Her baby sister, barely able to handle her own speed, stumbled around the house and looked at her with a shocked look.

"J-Just fell, get back inside," Hiccup wheezed. But Snowdrop stepped forward towards Astrid and looked up at her. Astrid could only look at her in suspended shock and grief, so happy that she couldn't move as Snowdrop wrapped her arms around her legs and buried her face between her knees with a shiver. She immediately accepted the return of her sister.

Time stopped. Astrid stared at the head of her baby sister, her heart fluttering with so many emotions, it hurt. She could smell her hair, see every strand of hair, feel her heartbeat against her shins. So many emotions, so many senses. She was so close to leaving all this behindâ€|

Astrid let her knees go and she fell to the ground, throwing her arms around Snowdrop and burying her own face into Snowdrop's shoulder and messy hair. Her body began to shiver and she felt the familiar feeling of tears warmly rush over her cheeks.

"Astrid," Snowdrop screamed without making sound.

"Astrid."

"Snowâ€|" Astrid murmured, threatening to crush her sister into her own body. She stayed there as Snowdrop held onto her desperately. "My dearâ€| little Snowdropâ€|"

She laughed. A smile and a sigh left her body and she opened her eyes to find Hiccup staggering towards them, one hand against the wall of their home. Astrid struggled to her feet and held Snowdrop's hand as she looked into Hiccup's face for some feeling of happiness. But he was shocked, his eyes half-full with tears and his mouth trembling. She reached out towards him. He shied away.

"Are you a ghost?" he asked barely above a whisper.

"I was never gone!" Astrid admitted, begging him with her eyes to step forward and touch her.

"I saw you. You were dead."

"Oh, Hiccup!"

"This can't be real," he wheezed, depressed. "This can't be."

Astrid bit her lip and stumbled forward, trapping her husband between her and the wall. He hissed as she reached up and cupped his face, looking into his eyes lovingly. She ran her thumb over his cheekbone and pressed her forehead to his. He sucked in a breath as he touched her face and felt her skin.

"You're warm," he cried. "How are you warm?"

Astrid kissed him shakily and slumped against him with a moan. Hiccup scrambled to hold onto her as she grew dizzy.

"Astrid? Astrid?!" Hiccup yelled. Astrid was limp in his arms, faint and limp but alive! Alive!

Inside, Toothless barked. She has exhausted herself.

This time, Hiccup listened to his Night Fury immediately. He picked Astrid up and carried her into their home, taking her straight to the bath. Toothless kept snickering with Stormfly, and left the dragon door with the gathering pouch in his mouth for bath snow. Snowdrop ran ahead and pulled as many blankets as she could haul to the floor beside the bath. Hiccup rested Astrid on the blanket.

"We have to get the suit off her," Hiccup murmured, his fingers shaking too hard to be of much use. The suit, made from old dragon skin stored in the cellars of the Great Hall, protected the riders from dragon fire and wind chill. It had done its job, the suit intact albeit discoloured from the fire. He gulped, the remembrance of her boat on fire. The rest of her skin was untouched and beautifully healthy. None of this made sense.

With Snowdrop's help, he freed Astrid from her clothes and pulled her naked body forth. Snowdrop twisted her mouth as Hiccup scoured her body for any signs of contusions and bruises.

"They said she was stabbed," she quipped. Hiccup sucked in a breath.

"Who told you that?"

"The other Dragonlings told me they found her bleeding from being stabbed into a pulp!"

Hiccup stared up at her, mouth parted and eyes wide. "What?"

"They weren't very nice to me!" she replied.

"Who said that?"

"Doesn't matter if wasn't true," Snowdrop huffed. "She looks good."

Hiccup nodded, knowing the truth, the blood, the knife, the girlâ€"

Toothless landed and dropped the snow into the tub, then warmed the snow to warm water. Hiccup somberly carried her into the water and rested her lightly, washing the water over her body. Soot and dried blood washed off wonderfully, and her hair unfroze in the warmth. Her mouth curled into a tired smile, her body curling around his warm hands as the water cooled. But Hiccup couldn't stop thinking about the one inconsistency in the events of the past week.

Astrid had been poisoned with a tool from the east. She was too far gone for Juniper to save her, so why would the girl stab her? And if she had stabbed her, how did Astrid come back?

"Stay here," Hiccup whispered to Snowdrop. "Stay quiet, keep her warm in the bath. I'll be back."

* * *

><p>Toothless landed in front of the Great Hall, making sure the coast was clear. Hiccup slipped off and ran inside. The fire had burned down to embers as he ran for the stairs, keeping in the shadows under the candlelight. He slinked down the stairs and approached the dungeon, staying quiet, hoping no one was looking.</p>

"She won't talk," Stoick growled. Hiccup stumbled and leapt to the side of the hallway as his father rounded the corner with Gobber in tow. "I've tried what I'm willing to try."

"I know, butâ€| you know I don't agree with that," Gobber replied.

"I had no choice."

"Sure, sure."

Stoick stopped, seeing Hiccup in the shadows and suddenly growing quiet. Hiccup stepped forward, keeping his eyes down.

"Hiccup? What are you doing up?" Stoick asked awkwardly. "You look like you've seen a ghost."

Gobber groaned and put his head in his hands. Stoick coughed uncomfortably.

"Yeah. Wife's funeral and all that," Hiccup said. Stoick grunted. "I haven't slept. I want to see the girl. Forâ€| closure."

Stoick raised his eyebrows. Gobber waved his hands around. "We were just with her..."

"Did she say anything?" Hiccup asked carefully, his eyes darting down the hall to where she would have been.

"Her jaw's broke, boy. And they roughed her up real good on the way

in," Gobber noted. Hiccup took in a ragged breath.

Stoick shook his head. "You are not the only one upset about Astrid."

"Is the girl still alive?" Hiccup asked.

Stoick rubbed his eyes. "Go look for yourself! I'm done for the day."

His father shut his mouth and stepped around him. Hiccup watched them until they left the hall, and sprinted to the girl's cell. He skittered over the damp and cold stone, racing towards her. He slammed into her cell door, which flew open surprisingly easily, and found the girl curled up in the corner of her cell. He ran to her and grabbed her.

She moaned in pain, her face bloody and her body misshapen and bruised. Hiccup hoisted her up and ran out the hall, only focusing on getting her home to safety. No one was there as Hiccup slipped out the Great Hall and to Toothless, getting the girl onto the Night Fury and charging home.

Spirit Weaver? Toothless asked sadly, too quiet for Hiccup to hear.

"Help me get her inside," Hiccup said quickly. The girl's head lolled over his elbow when he kicked open the door. The tub was empty, Astrid in the bedroom with Stormfly, when Hiccup stepped into the tub to clean the girl.

Snowdrop ran in and squeaked. "No, Hup! She's a bad lady!"

"No, no, that wouldn't make sense! she saved Astrid, she saved her."

He rubbed the girl's bloody head and washed away the red into the murky bath water. The girl was still breathing as Hiccup washed her. He pulled her out and wrapped her in a blanket, wet clothes and all, and placed her by the fire. He straightened and rubbed his face, groaning through a bout of nausea.

What the hell was happening? His wife had died, poisoned and stabbed. The poison almost killed her, the stabbing definitely finished the job, and yet she was in the other room. And the girl who had stabbed her was lying at his feet, faint and swollen and bruised, mangled to a disgusting mess, and in his house. He tugged on his own hair. What should he do? He couldn't tell anyone until he figured this out. The Eastern Islands' chief would be here in the morning to answer the poison question, but that wouldn't answer the girl. Or Astrid.

He turned and walked to the bedroom, where Astrid slept with Snowdrop playing with her hair. Hiccup sat next to her and ran a hand over her cheek. It was smooth, gorgeous, new. Her scars were faded to an untrained eye, her bruises gone, all traces of death absent on her flesh. Her body was warm and healthy and there were no stab wounds. She was breathing, she was alive, she was safe. How? Toothless was at the foot of the bed with Stormfly at the head, and Hiccup silently connected with Toothless.

How? he asked. Toothless perked up and squirmed slightly.

Bond, Toothless replied quietly. Hiccup turned and furrowed his brow.

Bond, as in our bond?

Yes. Bond. Astrid to Stormfly.

Hiccup licked his lips. That wasn't possible. The only person who knew about bonds was the person who inflicted them and that was "â€"

He leapt to his feet and ran to the girl at the hearth, taking a knee and reaching to her face. The girl opened her eyes. She snapped her hand outward and grabbed Hiccup's extended hand, crushing his fingers. He gasped as she rolled to her knees, swaying and grabbing her jaw with the other hand. She twitched her head over and there was a sickening crack. Hiccup gagged as the girl rotated her jaw and twisted her face.

"I'm surprised my jaw hasn't fallen off, yet," she groaned, holding her face. Hiccup pulled his hand free and was amazed at himself for not noticing before. Of course it was Rose! The tiny body, the green eyes, the red hair didn't match the brown she had before, but everything else was there, including that voice. Hiccup grabbed her hands and held them tightly.

"Rose!" he exclaimed. Rose smiled painfully.

"Where is she?" she asked quickly. "I thought you wouldn't make it in time."

"Did he hurt you? Are you alright?"

Rose squirmed and popped a rib back into place. "Everything is setting properly, that's a good thing. He hasâ€| a mean fist, nothing I haven't been through before."

Hiccup rubbed his face again. "Gods, I am so, so sorry."

"Where is Astrid?"

"Rose?" Astrid's voice whispered from the hall. Rose looked up and saw Astrid leaning against the wall, tired and struggling to stay upright. She saw Rose and faltered, stumbling back. Fear filled her eyes, but she swallowed and lifted her chin. Rose stabbing her still brought frightful memories to her mind.

"You're hurt, what did they do?" Astrid asked quietly, clearing her throat.

"I'm fine, just bruises that will disappear before sunrise," Rose dismissively replied, reaching up and beckoning Astrid next to her. Astrid pursed her lips and stepped forward, putting her hand in Rose's. Rose embraced her warmly and held her face. "You made it."

"So did you," Astrid remarked. "How did you get out?"

Hiccup shifted his weight to his foot, the prosthetic becoming painful under his knee. Rose looked up at him and smiled again. "Your husband retrieved me from my cell, I'm assuming after you found your way home. Stoick had been interrogating me up until then."

"With his fists," Hiccup growled, sitting behind Astrid and wrapping his arms around her, refusing to let go. Astrid's mouth fell open. Rose waved a hand defiantly.

"I'll be fine, I'm resilient. My bond kept me safe, and my dragon's blood is old. It's protects me."

Hiccup and Astrid stared, their own dragon's blood festering within their bodies. Rose stared back, the bruises upon her face fading slowly. Bones cracked and popped and Rose breathed deeply, waiting for the healing to finish.

"That's didn't happen when I found you," Hiccup said. "You were unconscious for days."

"Aye," Rose murmured. She closed her eyes as the bleeding in her eye blottedched away. "I should start at the beginning. It's a bit of a story, and there is much to warn you two about."

17. The Oncoming Threat

Happy Friday, everyone! I hope the past week has treated you well. New chappie every Friday, and thank you for all the reviews and follows. As part of an extra little project, PM me your favourite scene so far and I'll see what I can do about rendering some art for it! _

* * *

><p>Chapter Seventeen: The Oncoming Threat

Hiccup's mind hadn't quite processed the fact that he was holding Astrid. His wife sat in front of him on the floor by the fire, her back against his chest, her breaths deep and calm. Her skin smelled like it had before with a heat of something else; it smelled slightly warm, like fire. He ran through thought in his mind, promising to himself to never let Astrid go, to never give up, to never let anyone take her away from him ever again.

Rose sat across from them, her body upright and void of any abrasions. Astrid gave Hiccup's arm a squeeze, his arms wrapped protectively around her waist, as Rose cleared her throat and took one shaky breath.

"When I arrived at your wedding, I came alone," she began. "Alvin selected me himself."

"So he's still alive," Hiccup groaned. Astrid held a brave front, but inside, her heart tensed.

Rose nodded. "Oh, yes. And he's changed since the last you saw him. He had been waiting for the proper moment to strike Berk, and he thought he had a way with Crash. You may have only known him as a Skrill."

Hiccup's side cramped and he nodded once. "Two moons or so before our wedding. Storm and all, almost cut me in half."

Rose blanched and cleared her throat again. Hiccup, for the first time, noticed Rose was growing uncomfortable. "Crasherâ€| was the only dragon Alvin thought he had broken enough that would get close enough to you. Every other dragon refused tooth and claw to fly out, and many died for the cause."

"I had a dream," Hiccup interrupted quickly. "The Skrill's mind, it was as if we were bonded for a moment and I relived that day with him. He said that a girl told him not to. That was you."

Rose twisted her mouth and licked her lips. "Dragons dream much more vividly than we do. Legend says they even travel to Valhalla and meet with other dragons in another plane. It's said that dreams can even be embedded in time; a memory can stay in limbo forever until another mind thinks it. It'sâ€| complicated," Rose admitted. "I have been to Valhalla through these dragon dreams, through my bond to my dragon, it's how I managed to save Astrid from the cosmos."

Astrid sucked in a breath through her nose, twitching an eyebrow. She remembered the eye contact she'd had, the feeling of horror, not knowing it was Rose making sure she was there.

"Be that as it may, yes, Crasher was sent and when he returned, Alvin was informed that the Saviour had been cut down."

Astrid took a deep breath as Rose continued, running her hand through her shorn hair. "Of course, word got out a moon or so later that Hiccup not only survived, but was about to be married to another clan, presumably to strengthen Berkâ€|"

Rose swallowed and looked into the fire. The firelight danced over her frail skin, the smell of smoke filling their noses lightly. "Alvin was so furious that he had Crasher killed."

Silence hung in the air with a heavy tension. Hiccup could only think of what they did to kill such a beast, but the thought wasn't one he wanted to linger upon. Astrid, the pain from the poison and the stabbing shallow in her mind, could only imagine how or why.

"Alvin then had every woman lined up that could stand," Rose breathed.

"How many?" Astrid asked immediately. Rose flicked her eyes up, harsh and deep.

"Hundreds. And that's only those who could stay on their feet, breathe consistently, and not pregnant," Rose replied. Astrid pursed her lips and closed her eyes. Kidnapped women. The thought made her sick. "When Alvin saw me, he recognized I was the healthiest â€" he didn't know about the bond that made it so â€" and had me make a dress. He supplied fine cotton, thread, tools, and had the men watch as I made it. He also found a potion to change the colour of my hair from red to brown. He set me on a sea stack near trader Johann's route until I was picked up."

Hiccup squinted. "Why didn't you say anything? About the Outcasts,

Crasher, Alvin?"

"She did," Astrid whispered. "She did."

Hiccup looked over at her, giving her a squeeze as she kept her eyes close. Her forehead went rigid and her mouth quivered. "The night you were bonded to Toothlessâ€| I remember it nowâ€| 'I come from a small island whereâ€| terror creeps in the dark. The women are raped every night and the men are beaten with weapons you cannot even imagineâ€| I have seen flesh torn off of children and my own mother forced to feed dragons to other dragonsâ€|'"

Astrid placed a hand over her mouth and refused to recount anymore. No, no more tears would flow from her eyes. Not for Alvin. Rose reached over and placed a hand on her knee. "I should have known," Astrid confessed as she composed herself. "I should have known. No other place would do such a thing."

Hiccup held her tightly and rocked her gently, back and forth, keeping his hand over her abdomen.

"I didn't say anything," Rose said gently, "because of my mother. They knew that if they used her as leeway, I would do whatever they wanted."

"That didn't stop you from bonding Toothless and I," Hiccup interjected.

Rose smiled tightly. "Yes. Alvin had no idea that I was healthy because of my bond to one of the imprisoned dragons, and that my long-lasting bond had transcended from one dragon to more and more bonds, eventually being able to connect with any dragon willing to share their mind. I was kept alive because I could keep the dragons alive; I knew how to heal them and to keep them breathing through any trial Alvin put them through. That meantâ€| I knew some of the dragons you encountered."

Astrid looked over to Hiccup and gave him a look as Hiccup thought about that.

"They called you the Saviour because most of the dragons were previously under the control of the Red Death. When you freed them from her nest, and after a winter or so of Alvin trying to figure out how to train dragons like you did, he captured his own. Word always lingered among them about you and how you saved, healed, trained, and freed dragons over each summer and winter andâ€| they yearned for the same thing. They want nothing more than to be free again."

Hiccup pulled away from Astrid and put his head in his hands, breathing deeply and feeling nauseous over again. "Gods, noâ€| how many?"

"Too many."

"Why don't they simply fly out?" Astrid asked. "Stormfly would have set the whole island on fire to escape."

Rose shifted uncomfortably. "Some are broken. Theirâ€| spirits are broken. Their minds are no longer their own. Some have tried, and they are the first to die. Alvin has found ways of preventing

retaliation. Dousing flames, cutting wings, pulling teeth, clamping, tying, restraining, starvingâ€¢ like humans, all dragons have a breaking point where they decide what is better: life or death."

Hiccup kept his head in his hands, shaking in denial. "He's been spending the last few years building an army of broken dragons?"

Rose hesitated before giving one nod. "And people. He sent Crashers to kill you to give the dragons nothing to live for. Then he sent me to know which clan you'd be married to and which ones would pose a threat in anger. I gave you the bond after you chose Astrid; I would have regardless of wife. The clans weren't happy, for one. And the Outcasts would send alternate means to kill you. I had to keep you stronger. That being said, when they knew you were married to a Berk woman, and I had nothing to report, they thought I was lying. They had good reason to, and they knew the dragons trusted me, so punishing me was the next best thing."

Hiccup growled and made it to his feet, pacing around the women, his heart beating too fast as if it were being struck by the Skrill's lightning all over. "That's not fair! It's disgusting!"

"Hush, you'll wake Snowdrop," Astrid murmured. Hiccup balked, but he put his fingers to his lips and squeezed his eyes shut. Rose quickly continued.

"When you found me, I had been in chains for months since returning from the wedding. They tortured me, scarred me â€" even dragon's blood can't prevent the worst scars â€" and every day, I hung against the stone wall wondering what they would do next. Then, Alvin came to me with my mother."

Rose stopped to breathe. Hiccup stopped pacing.

"He forced her to tell me that they were leaving," Rose said hoarsely. "They told me that they had sent a wedding present infused with Outcast Orchid to kill Hiccup, and that they were relocating to a better vantage point. They didn't tell me where and before mum could do anything else, Alvin grabbed her and left me. Then, the fire hit the island and burnt to my cell. Other dragons who wouldn't have been able to keep up were left behind."

Astrid looked over to Hiccup. "Did you find any other dragons there when you found Rose?" she asked him.

"He wouldn't have," Rose replied. "They were too injured, and they spent their last minutes shielding me from the heat. They are gentle and protective creatures, as I'm sure you know already."

Rage bubbled into Hiccup's being and before he could rationalize himself, he plowed his fist into the nearest wall. Astrid and Rose jumped as Hiccup grabbed his bloody knuckles and held his fist to his chest. Alvin spent years in the dark, and Berk assumed it meant peace. But hundreds of people and dragons were suffering. How could they have been so blind? Why didn't Stoick see through the veil and investigate?

Astrid was behind him and grabbed his hand. He almost pulled away

before he grabbed Astrid and held her against him. She let him, the same rage searing through her.

"We need to find him," Hiccup growled.

Rose jumped to her feet. "No, no no no. Berk isn't ready. Berk needs to prepare, leave, do anything to stay away from Alvin for as long as possible. You don't understand how powerful he is!"

"The Berserkers are also nowhere to be found," Astrid said quickly, thinking strategy immediately and trying to find the right words.

"Oh Gods," Rose said. "No, I didn't know that. But that would make sense, why else move to a better location?"

Hiccup wanted to scream. "An Armada is impossible to hide!"

"Stoick hasn't been to the west in years, since then Alvin has found all sorts of hiding places to hide entire fleets and armies within. And he has a whole repertoire of new weapons that Berk is not ready for â€" Sun Sap, nets, everything! You must be wise! And I am sure there are the other clans that need to know as well, unless they have already betrayed your allegiance because of your marriage."

The sun's rays began to caress the frame of the dragon door above them. Astrid stepped away from Hiccup and looked to Rose.

"We have to call for a meeting," Astrid demanded. "We can't waste any time."

Hiccup nodded immediately. "Toothless!"

The Night Fury poked his head through the dragon door.

"I want you to protect Rose at all times," he said firmly. "Berk is going to be outraged until we can find a way to prove she's innocent. I want no hands on her."

Of course. I will fly you two out when you need.

"Thank you," Rose said. Hiccup looked at her. He forgot she could hear him, too.

"Let's go," Astrid said, making it to her feet and dropping the furs to her feet, her hand trailing over her belly and falling to her side.

* * *

><p>Toothless flew low with Stormfly on his tail. The Great Hall's doors were slightly ajar to let them into the warm hall. They didn't land, but flew straight inside, landing on the platform at the back by Stoick. The villagers shouted at the annoyance of having dragons flying overhead.<p>

"Dad!" Hiccup yelled. "We need to talk."

Stoick grumbled. "Hiccup, I haven't heard anything back from the scouts. I will tell you once I find out more."

"It's an emergency!"

The villagers looked over with an ounce of the dismissal they always carried for the uninteresting Hiccup. Hiccup sneered as Stormfly landed.

"I'm sure you can speak to me about it without raising your voice," Stoick complained. "Calm down and talk to me in a reasonable fashion."

"Oh for Gods â€“" Astrid spat. She leapt off Stormfly and bore her gaze into Stoick with a fiery intensity. Stoick jumped in his seat and the rest of the villagers all exploded into a frenzy of confusion. Hiccup looked between Stoick, who had gone as pale as a Screaming Death, and Astrid, who frowned at him in disappointment. He almost wanted to shy into the shadows.

"Ghost!"

"Corpse!"

"Demon!"

Astrid held her shoulders back, back in her burned riding suit, her hair back in its braid. Snowdrop scurried around her and leapt into Stoick's stiff arms. Stoick stood and glared as the child crawled over him and onto his shoulders.

"What dark magic is this?!" he bellowed. Astrid rolled her eyes. "What is this illusion?!"

"It's Astrid!" Snowdrop replied happily. "Silly."

"I should be upset with you for setting me on fire," she said scathingly. She knew that the fire was required and a Viking tradition, but she appreciated it when Stoick blanched and wavered.

"I need everyone's attention!" Hiccup requested.

"Oh, you got their attention all right," Gobber replied through his bewilderment.

"Everyone calm down!" Hiccup continued.

Juniper ran to the platform. "No, I saw her! That wretched Outcast girl poisoned and stabbed her! There was no saving her!"

"Stabbing, yes," Rose countered as she dismounted from Toothless, wearing a set of old clothes from Astrid that she had been saving for Snowdrop. When she stepped forward, another bout of fits and protest filled the room. "Poison, no."

Juniper hissed at the girl. She was healthy â€“ starved, but pink and clear of any injury â€“ and she looked too kind to be a murderer, beautifully youthful and with an aura of graciousness that didn't match her origin.

When Juniper growled and stepped forward, Toothless unfurled his massive wings and shrieked at the matron, who cried out and skittered back.

"This is Rose," Hiccup yelled over the crowd. "She came to our wedding and bestowed the gift of a bond upon me."

"I am alive because of her!" Astrid continued. The crowd was simmering with confusion and anger and fear. "I am alive because of this girl. She is an ally to Berk and we need to heed her words!"

Stoick raised a hand to the crowd, silencing them into a tense fervor. Some abandoned their food to glare up. But there were some that didn't stay still. Snotlout and Fishlegs shoved their way to the platform with the twins behind them. Ruffnut clambered onto the platform and crashed into Astrid.

Astrid felt the air leave her lungs as Ruffnut crushed her ribs, embracing her in a very unexpected display of relief. Astrid held her rider-sister back, squeezing her harder as Ruffnut cursed and swore and threatened Astrid over and over for the grief she put her through.

"Don't you ever leave me with the boys like that again, I swear to Odin," she barked. Astrid smiled.

The display of the dragon riders being reunited, for they had been hit the hardest with grief of all levels, softened the crowd long enough for Hiccup to speak up, mainly speaking to Stoick.

Hiccup explained the ritual to a quieting crowd, and Astrid added to his explanations when she needed to as Rose stared at Stoick, keeping her stature firm and calm. It was difficult for the villagers to follow along, but they understood the basics: Rose had found a way to save Astrid and she took the risks she needed to in order to do it, and that in doing so, Astrid was bonded to Stormfly like Hiccup was bonded to Toothless. It gave many a headache, but the details didn't interest them as much as the next topic.

"I knew Astrid had been poisoned," Rose said in response to a question, "because I have seen it. It is a new plant, Outcast Orchid."

Fishlegs furrowed his brow. "I haven't heard of that."

"Neither have we," Hiccup responded.

"It is potent," Rose continued, "and it attacks the insides of the individual, practically turning them into liquid. The first I had heard of it was a raid here on Berk in the river and wells."

"That was the last time Berk had an issue with the Outcasts, that's when we lost Astrid's parents," Gobber filled in.

"They have been creating potions and poultices, trying to find the stealthiest ways to get their enemies to ingest it. You assumed the east sent it based on the carvings, but Alvin has incurred hundreds of easterners, many of which with carving hands. A perfect ploy."

"If they have easterners, alive and able to craft," Tuffnut said with an extra degree of deduction, "do they have people from other islands? Even Berk?"

Everyone stared at Rose for an answer. She stayed stoic for a moment before looking up. "Yes."

Many people yelled at that, their loved ones taken years ago by Outcasts, presumed dead. Astrid whirled around to face Hiccup, the same thought running through their minds, a new hope: their mothers. Stoick also stepped back and joined the shouting as Rose stayed expressionless.

"I don't know who. But yes, where you find Alvin, you will find people from anywhere in the alliance. But take my warning!" she yelled, startling some back into silence. "We believe Alvin has the Armada on his side, and I can guarantee he has dragons as well fuelled by anger and pain, lacking their freewill."

"We have dragons, too!" Stoick countered.

"You have six dragons," Rose argued, "that you have trained to a level that would be remotely adequate. Even with Toothless, Stormfly, Thornado, Hookfang, Meatlug, and Barf and Belch, that doesn't dismiss the fact that Alvin has tortured and broken hundreds. And with Dagur on his side, you better believe that he will do anything it takes to seize any islands he wants."

The villagers murmured amongst themselves as Stoick looked to Rose reluctantly. "Why would he attack us?"

"You have resources," Rose said. "Berk poses as a safe harbour for dragons and so long as it stands unharmed, all dragons idolize it, thus neglecting Alvin of control. He wants to rule the islands under his brutality. No one can understand it, but they can suffer through it regardless."

Then she subtly turned her gaze to Stoick. "And I'm sure he's still sore about a contract from a long time ago."

Stoick looked up and glared, then cleared his throat. Astrid and Hiccup traded glances, confused. Rose twisted her mouth, waiting for Stoick to finish the thought for her.

Stoick grumbled. "How do you know about that? How do you know about Valka?"

"Your mum?" Astrid asked under her breath to Hiccup. Hiccup meanwhile looked at his father with wide eyes and tight shoulders.

"What is she talking about, dad?" Hiccup asked for every villager present. Stoick breathed deeply and groaned.

"Before your mother and I married, there was talk that she had a suitor; the contract changed to better suit the clans," Stoick confessed. "I never thoughtâ€|"

Rose shrugged. "It makes too much sense."

The hall rumbled with quiet murmurs, Stoick fuming as he stared up at Rose. He cleared his throat. "What do you suggest we do?" Stoick asked officially.

"Call the clans together again under the alliance," Spitelout suggested from behind Stoick. "If they tried to poison Astrid or Hiccup, they may strike assuming we are still grieving. An opportune moment."

"Some of them are still unstable from the wedding," Stoick grumbled. "Convincing them will take some sacrifice."

Many automatically asserted that they would do what it takes while the rest looked uneasy. Rose nodded strongly.

"Those trained will train others," Stoick mentioned.

"More dragons," Rose agreed. Hiccup looked to her.

"How will we train dragons we don't have?" he asked.

Rose looked back and gave a sly grin. "There are dragons who have brothers and sisters with Alvin. If we find them, then we have instant allies."

Gobber rubbed his hand over his mug-extension attached to his other arm. "I will light up the forge immediately, build weapons, shields, get some youths o scout the tunnels."

Stoick nodded. "Alright, alright. Spitelout will find the other clans, Rose will get started on whatever it is she does with Hiccup, Astrid will gather and fit the children and elderly with armour for protection, Gobber will start the forge. We start work today. We assume the worst until otherwise. I will go over our structures, make them ready for whatever the Outcasts have planned."

Stoick looked up at Astrid and pursed his lips. He approached the platform and ascended the steps. Toothless swiped a wing over Rose but Stoick had his eyes trained on Astrid. He extended a hand, clasping her wrist and pulling her in for a strong embrace. "It's good to have you backâ€œ! I was worried he would try to follow you," he murmured into her ear. No one else heard. Astrid swallowed and returned the embrace stiffly. He pulled away and took a deep breath. "Let's hope we haven't pissed off the other clans too much. We'll need all the help we can find."

18. Call to Arms

Happy Friday, everybody. Life has been busy, and I hope your week was as wonderful and exciting as mine! Enjoy the chappie!

* * *

><p>Chapter Eighteen: Call to Arms

The hall became alive with anxious life, the same back when dragon-fighting was in its prime. Squads formed, strategies revived upon tables, the dragons roared and vibrated with a festering energy. Rose mounted Toothless and sat in his saddle, talking to him in

hushed voices as Toothless left the hall to wait outside. Astrid and Hiccup looked at each other before they followed the Night Fury out.

The sun was peeking through the stormy clouds above as the riders saddled their dragons. Astrid snatched Hiccup's arm and pulled him to the side quickly. She pushed him against the wall and grabbed his cheek with one of her hands. Hiccup grabbed her wrist and kissed her once. They pressed their foreheads together again and Astrid centred herself.

"Hiccup," she said firmly, "we need to have a plan."

"Like what?"

Astrid licked her lips, her eyes darting back and forth as if she was running thousands of conversations in her mind. Her eyes were pink and they were glassy as she looked up.

"If things get out of hand, if anything happens to either of us, we need to have a plan. We didn't before and I don't want any chances if it happens again."

Hiccup was quiet before nodding stiffly. "What do you suggest?"

"You are the priority," she stated simply. Hiccup looked into her eyes reluctantly. "If anything happens, it can't happen to you."

Hiccup hissed against her mouth. "Astrid â€œ"

"I don't want to argue," she interrupted. "I don't want anything to happen to Snowdrop, and the dragons are counting on you to stay alive. Every breath you take is a breath for them, and you need to keep breathing until they are free."

Hiccup held onto her. "You've already made a sacrifice."

"No," she replied with a slightly satirical snort. "I had a bowl of soup that was a little poisoned. I made no sacrifice."

"What about our child?" he whispered. There was a silence as villagers passed nearby, scuttling off as they noticed they were having a private conversation. Hiccup lowered his voice, tiny and fragile. "You haven't said anything about it."

Astrid stared and shook her head, making noise but no words. Hiccup felt a lump in his throat growing.

"Is it gone?" he asked gently. Astrid frowned.

"I don't know, Hiccup," she said firmly.

"You've always known," he argued.

"Well, I _don't_," Astrid hissed.

Hiccup didn't move, but she could see the tears welling up above his lower eyelashes. He was trying so hard to remain passive.

"You don't look upset," he muttered, heartbroken. Astrid's heart seized within her chest and she felt the sting of his words.

"I don't have time," Astrid said as she clenched her teeth.

"You always do that," Hiccup spat.

Astrid pursed her lips. "What?"

Hiccup flapped his hands about unnecessarily, angry and biting back tears. "You always pretend that nothing gets to you! As if the possibility of losing our child means nothing!"

Astrid stared at him, mouth open and eyes wide. "I never said that. You think I asked for this?"

"No!" Hiccup countered. "But it would be nice for you to show me an emotion that made sense!"

Astrid shoved him back, her heart aching. "Shut up!" she shrieked. No one was around, but if they were, she didn't care. Hiccup paled and stepped back. "I felt my soul get torn away from my body! Do I know if it's still there? No, I don't! And frankly, I don't want to know. Not right now. Not today! I can't handle any more shit today! Okay?!"

He slapped her hands over her mouth to shut herself up. Her face was wet, her body shook, her blood burned. Hiccup clamped his mouth shut and sucked in a breath. "Astrid, gods, I'm sorry."

Astrid shook her head and raised a hand, shutting him up, almost ashamed of him, almost ready to walk away.

"If anything happens, if they come for us, if they try to take Berk, you have to make sure you come out of it alive. You fly to the cove with Toothless, pretend you're dead, anything to make them turn tail and have no reason to stay."

She said it without room for question. She couldn't get upset yet. She was almost certain about its fate. Her scarred body couldn't keep it, but to think of thatâ€¦ there was too much shit heading their way for her to think about that. To grieve would risk everything.

"And what about me?" Hiccup asked shakily. "What happens to me if something happens to you? You're all I have left."

"You keep going," she said harshly. "You have to promise me that if something happens to me, you have to keep going. You fight, you do whatever it takes."

"I'm not the fighter, you are, you always have been," Hiccup argued. Astrid frowned.

"If this gets bad, we will all be fighters. But I will not let them get you. You are my husband, half of my family, my life, and I will die trying to preserve that, as much as you've pissed me off."

She tore away from him suddenly and left him against the wall, done with the conversation, making it final. Hiccup went to follow her, panicking, watching the back of her head leave him. She made it back

to the front steps of the hall where Rose and Toothless remained, when Rose looked over Toothless' head and pursed her lips.

"You have a visitor, Hiccup," she said, pointing. They turned and both suppressed a groan as an all-too-familiar face sneered back at them crankily. The unruly hair, the huge frame clad in heavy armour, the wild brown eyes, the greatsword; Cauli from the Eastern Islands marched up to the couple with an amused look on her harsh face.

"Ah. I see things didn't crumble after the honeymoon."

Cauli grinned and extended a hand to Astrid, who took her wrist and gave a shake. Astrid didn't smile at the expression. Hiccup noticed. No one would have known about the fight they'd had seconds before. He was almost envious. Cauli put her hands on her hips, looking to Rose on the dragon. She squinted.

"Gods, you look a lot different than last time," she quipped.
"Moreâ€| gross." Rose shrugged.

"Just a haircut," Rose lied.

"Suits you. Gross suits you."

Rose nodded gracefully as Cauli sucked in a breath and addressed the couple formally, crankiness and all. Hiccup was grateful she had not snapped either of them in half, which struck him as odd. Cauli saw the confusion in his face and her smile disappeared.

"If you're wondering about my dad, he's dead," she said bluntly. Hiccup's heart jumped and Astrid straightened her back. "I'm the leader now."

"What happened?" Hiccup asked quickly. He remembered Cauli's father, young and strong and as headstrong as she.

Cauli raised an eyebrow. "â€|Oh, that's not good. You really should know the answer to that question."

Hiccup and Astrid looked between them and Rose perked up. Toothless croaked and Hiccup felt the bond.

She's bleeding. I can smell it. Under her armour.

"Toothless," Hiccup said immediately, a dreadful feeling bubbling in his chest. "Go get Stoick and Juniper." The Night Fury nodded and slinked back into the Great Hall.

Astrid looked to the docks, where more and more ships were landing. There were far more than she expected, dozens and dozens of ships entering the docks with hundreds of people stumbling into Berk. Astrid seized Hiccup's hand as Cauli shook her head sadly.

"What happened?" Hiccup asked again, with more demand in his voice. Stoick and Juniper exited the haul and jogged over to them, noticing the influx of people at the shore. Rose was behind, listening from a distance with Toothless looking very agitated.

"It started with us," Cauli said quickly, nodding at Stoick. "One moment, my father was drinking his mead, the next he was dead."

Poisoned."

Stoick and Juniper balked. Astrid cursed loudly, but Cauli didn't falter, her eyes grimacing slightly from a tinge of pain. "Just as I took leadership, the northern islands and southern lands called for aid for the same reasons. Both leaders, dead. Same poison."

"Oh shit," Astrid choked. Cauli nodded.

"How would Berk not know about this?!" Stoick asked, the alarm too great to hide.

"I don't know," Cauli spat. "We sent six distress calls. I almost thought it was you who was poisoning everyone. I made way back to my island to find more resources, trying to figure out why our leaders were dropping like rotted flies, sending a warning to you, when we were attacked."

Hiccup's knees went weak and Astrid bit one of her knuckles.

"Outcasts and Berserkers," Cauli breathed. She grabbed her shoulder. Hiccup noticed the pauldron was split.

"They attacked throughout the night, killing and capturing, dragon fire lighting up the night sky like Thor's rage was pathetic in comparison. Our fields were razed, our livestock and villagers stolen in great nets hoisted by Monstrous Nightmares, explosions obliterating hundreds of my kinsmen on shore and on land. And then they left. I gathered those left, whatever squadrons survived and those that returned from the north and south, and gathered as many people as I could. We weren't sure where we should go until a scout found us, asking about a spoon or something."

Hiccup's back was shaking and Astrid had a hand pressed to her mouth, her body trembling as nausea swept over her. Stoick's mouth was dry, his eyes tired, Cauli's voice echoing in his head as the sobs and groans of the survivors travelled upwind to his ears.

"I have everyone that's left," Cauli finished. "North, south, and east. We had nowhere else to go."

"We didn't get any distress calls," Stoick said hoarsely, eyes wide and lips loose. "Nothing. Nothing from either direction."

"One may get misplaced," Astrid sneered. "But sixâ€¦ no way, there is no way we wouldn't have gotten those messages."

"Those scouts never came back, either," Cauli added. "So I think our little Outcast problem from those good ol' days is much, much worse."

Astrid looked over to Rose, who was pale and still and absolutely terrified.

"They have us surrounded," Stoick growled. "Astrid, you go to Spitelout, tell him about this. No one flies except for Hiccup and Rose. I want the Great Hall secured and reinforced with any spare metal we have. We need more dragons, and not tomorrow, but right now. Blow the horn."

"I will tend to the villagers with the matrons, notify Gothi," Juniper stated. "And find the new leaders."

"Make sure you tend to her. Her shoulder is bleeding and she would rather hide that," Hiccup told Juniper. Cauli almost protested before giving in and rolling her eyes.

Astrid grabbed Hiccup and kissed him firmly. She hugged him. "I still love you," she huffed in his ear.

"Yeah, I know," was the reply.

They dispersed, running to their tasks with a new need of desperation. Hiccup climbed onto Toothless in front of Rose and clipped himself in, pulling Rose's hands around him. He watched Astrid sprint to the war horn, abandoned for years, take a great breath, and blow it into the horn with as much strength she could muster. The blast of the awful and looming sound echoed throughout the village. Hundreds began running, fighters to the forge and their weapons, the dragons racing to their riders. No matter how many years it had been, everyone knew the sound well.

Toothless ran off the edge of the cliffs, unfurling his wings, roaring against the sun and the restless ocean, pulling up into the sky with Rose clutching at Hiccup, the exhilaration of the wind on her face new and wild. Bonded to a dragon, yes. Free to ride one, never. "Rose, how do we find those dragons?"

"Working on it," Rose replied breathlessly. "Fly over the ocean first."

Hiccup flew on hovering over the clouds to remain hidden.

Rose closed her eyes with her cheek against Hiccup's back. She let her mind go, her body relaxing and the world around her silent. She searched for a connection. It felt like a sword entering a sheathe, a snug and firm feeling that was alive with colour and emotion. Having another mind in hers, embracing it and welcoming it, thinking happy thoughts, asking for help, thinking of the horrific images of the dragons she had cared for and healed and whispered calming notions to them as they struggled to sleep, begging for help, crying out

Hiccup felt Rose tense, and she grunted. A connection hit her between her eyes, her scars contracting. Hiccup was about to ask if she was okay before the ocean below them rumbled and burst.

A pair of huge jade coloured wings reached up into the sky, making Hiccup stare in wonderment. Wet scales glinted from the sunlight ahead as a body tore from the clutches of the salty water, an ear-shattering scream rumbling below them. A long neck attached to a huge body full of water flew below them. Rose could only stare at the beauty of it. She smiled against Hiccup as the Scauldron connected with her and pledged her allegiance to Berk, thinking thoughts of her mate.

"Keep it up!" Hiccup yelled breathlessly. The Scauldron followed close behind, joining in the calls for help. Rose searched again, concentrating so hard her ears rang. Thunderdrums emerged in a small

pack as they flew over the neutral islands. Rose growled as more and more dragons connected with her. Some refused, some too scared, but many immediately joined them. Changewings with their gigantic wings and changing colour followed as Typhoomerangs blasted into the sky above them with Timberjacks soaring below them.

There are so many!

Hiccup nodded in amazement as more and more dragons, some thought to be untrainable, joined the swarm flying for Berk's aid. Dozens of Terrors joined next, and Toothless roared as the others chortled.

"Are they going to get along?" Hiccup asked worriedly.

"They have no choice," Rose murmured tiredly. "They are amazing creatures, they'll put aside their differences for a time."

Hiccup twisted his mouth against the wind and turned around, banking wide so the new collection of dragons followed, roaring and howling. Toothless panted nervously. Hiccup rested a hand on his head.

"We're gonna be okay," he said to his dragon. He only felt worry beneath him as a response. They flew until they saw Berk in the distance, and Rose asked Hiccup to land just outside of the village. He landed on a high rock with a small meadow below, where the other dragons landed, full of tension and angst and energy. Rose leapt off and Hiccup followed, his shoulders tightening at the sight.

"We have a few dozen," Hiccup noted. "Now what?"

Rose turned and licked her lips in thought. "I need to talk to them first."

"What?"

Rose huffed. "Trust, Hiccup. It's one of those things you highlight in that book of yours."

He nodded stiffly, remembering the frayed parchment of the dragon book in the Great Hall. Nowhere in the pages, however, were scriptures about bonds, dragon connection, or trust outside of a riding relationship. Everything he thought he knew seemed like Dragonling material compared to the extent of this moment. Rose softened and grabbed his hand, pulling him down from the rock and towards the pack of dragons, which divided themselves into a ring to remain on equal ground.

"The bond I have given you has had time to settle into your spirit," she murmured, "which will open up new bonds. They won't ever be as strong as Toothless, but it will serve."

She pulled him towards the circle. "Slowly," she whispered, entering the circle with the Timberjack glaring at them, the edges of his massive wings glinting against the sky. Hiccup's back began to sweat as all the new and aggressive stares terrorized his body with judgement and fear. They came to the middle, now surrounded by these new dragons, and Rose squeezed Hiccup's hand. The sight was extraordinary; dozens of dragons, hundreds of colours, a spectrum of sizes and emotions.

"They all have a reason for being here," Rose mused. "They all want to fight."

Hiccup remained staring, looking from dragon to dragon as they stared at him with piercing eyes.

Saaaviour.

He whirled around, a new voice entering his mind, the bond hitting the tiny scar on his neck like a fist. His eyes watered and he wavered as the Scauldron looked at him, bonding with him. The huge oceanic creature slithered forward on stumpy legs, her belly full of water ready to be boiled and spat out on him at any moment. Rose held Hiccup still, small hands around his elbows, as she loomed over him, the rest of the dragons watching. Toothless bared his teeth and crouched, his tail flicking.

The Scauldron reared and Hiccup gasped as her claws came out, her wings blocking the sun and her roar piercing the clouds. He thought she was going to attack, but then he saw it. The scars marking her belly, her neck, glistening in the dim sunlight.

Suddenly, a flash slammed into Hiccup's mind, and he was no longer in Berk. _He was in the ocean, holding his breath, looking up at the surface that was glowing orange with fire and hatred. The bottoms of boats passed overhead and shouts and explosions rumbled, muffled by the water. Another Scauldron huddled against the rocks, growling. The boats were circling above them, and out of nowhere, a heavy and ferocious cage split the surface, shooting down over the other Scauldron, encasing it, trapping it with hooks that pierced his wings, his neck. He screamed, he screamed as the cage lifted him up by his flesh, trying to struggle free. No, not my mate, not my mate! No, you're hurting him! Get him out of the cage, get him out of this demon! She swam onto the cage, but it was lined with barbs and spikes strong enough to stab her through her scales. Stop struggling, stop struggling! You're hurting yourself, no, no, please, stop!_

Hiccup slumped into Rose's hands, his knees hitting the ground.

"Whoa, easy!" Rose said as she eased him to the ground. She saw it too, the perspective, the Scauldron's vivid reason for joining them. The dragon looked at them proudly, eyes intense. Hiccup looked up as emotions boiled in his gut.

"Whatâ€¦" Hiccup choked. "What do they _have_?" he wheezed through gritted teeth. "The explosionsâ€¦ that cageâ€¦ the hooksâ€¦ Rose, what in Thor's name is coming?"

Rose pursed her lips and shook her head gently. "I don't know. I only healed them. I never had a chance to fight for them."

Fiiight, the Scauldron hissed in his mind, mournful and determined. Hiccup was dizzy, panicked. Toothless slinked through the dragons and huddled against his rider, comforting him.

Hiccup looked at the Night Fury and imagined his torn away from his grasp. The thought of losing him made his heart race, and Hiccup sneered.

"We will fight," Hiccup growled. Toothless bared his teeth and the other dragons shrieked in unison, making the ground shake. Over the crest of the mountain, Astrid looked towards the sound. She scooped Snowdrop into her arms and carried her to the hall, her grip threatening to crush her sister into her own ribcage.

19. No Promises

Happy Saturday! I'm so so sorry this is a day late. Work is piling up. Anyhoo, here we go! I am posting this from my iPad so tell me if it looks a little wonky. _

* * *

><p>Chapter Nineteen: No Promises

Rose opted to stay with the free dragons, staying away from Berk's tense villagers, as Hiccup returned to the village to gather his own supplies. Gobber and Snotlout, along with some other broad men, dragged spare metal and wood to the Great Hall, where the sick, old, and young filed in quickly. Cauli's soldiers carried the remainder of the eastern, northern and southern islands' supplies to the Great Hall cellars while various figures helped carry the injured and ill directly to Juniper and her matrons waiting outside the hall.

Hiccup landed outside the hall where Stoick intercepted him.

"Did you find any?" Stoick asked quickly. Hiccup nodded.

"We have a few dozen, I think it will help," Hiccup replied. "They're with Rose."

Stoick twisted his mouth. Hiccup sighed. "What now?"

"I still don't trust her."

Hiccup wasn't surprised. "She found them, dad."

His father groaned. "She still hasn't told us everything. I can see it in her eyes. There's something she's not saying."

"Stoick!" Gobber called from the hall. "The leaders are gathered."

The chief nodded and grabbed Hiccup's arm. They both entered the hall, stepping around scared and terrified clansmen from the other islands. Many were bloody, others bandaged. Some stared at the walls of the hall, vacant and corpse-like. Hiccup swallowed. Many islanders looked at him, murmuring to their neighbors.

"He can talk to dragons!"

"He blew the Red Death out of the clouds!"

"He's skinnier than I thought he would be!"

At the back of the hall, through a heavy door, was a private room with a large wooden table and many chairs, reserved for strategizing

attack and defense. There was a heavy layer of dust upon the table, as one of the last times they used it was to plan the attack on the nest all those years ago. A golden dragon hung from the roof with a sword slicing through its belly, and beneath it sat the shaken leaders within the alliance.

Cauli sat in a chair, leaning uncomfortably with a large bandage wrapping around her bicep. Without her armour on, leaving behind a tan leather tunic, she looked relatively harmless. She had wide shoulders, but a built frame that had intriguing curves of lady-like demeanor. Across from Cauli was someone Hiccup did not expect.

Sitting upright with a false sense of bravery, wearing a tattered gown that looked like it could have been gold before, was Barb. The very bubbly and obnoxious girl from the engagement announcement moons before sat traumatized, her hair out of place in wild frizzy brown curls, the paint on her face replaced with dirt and unfortunate memories. Next to her was an older man Hiccup did not recognize. Short black hair framed his war-stricken face, scarred across the nose and cutting through one eye. Tattoos covered his skin and he wore a look of absolute rage upon face, and brown eyes looked around the room.

Hiccup sat next to Stoick, who addressed the new island leaders.

"Barb of the southern lands," Stoick addressed formally. "And Netmug from the north. You have assumed leadership after your parents?"

The man sneered and Hiccup felt immediately threatened. "Obviously. What I'd like to know, though, is where the hell you've been."

"They haven't been receiving any scrolls or messages," Cauli growled. "They don't know, yet."

Stoick pursed his lips behind his beard. Barb straightened her shoulders and breathed a shaky breath.

"Netmug Â€"

"Shut it!" Netmug growled, glowering at Barb next to him. She shrank in her seat, her body curling onto itself to protect herself.

"You watch your words around your fellow leader!" Cauli barked in Barb's defense. "Stop acting like an animal before I hunt you like one."

"That's enough!" Stoick boomed. "Netmug, be calm. Barb, what were you about to say?"

Barb didn't want to answer. She looked like she had been slapped across the face, or beaten like a small animal just trying to survive. She rubbed her shoulder and Netmug seethed next to her. Cauli pursed her lips and cursed.

"Netmug and Barb married one moon ago, to join the southern and northern lands. Both sets of parents have perished. They assumed leadership jointly over both clans," Cauli stated angrily, not taking her eyes off Netmug. Hiccup didn't like the stare, but he could read

her thoughts on her irises as clear as day. She hated Netmug, and she was bloodthirsty.

Stoick flicked a glance between Barb and Netmug, and he took a deep breath. "We had no knowledge of this arrangement."

"That's alright," Barb whispered weakly. Netmug slammed his fist on the table to shut her up. Instantly, Cauli leapt to her feet, a hidden dagger brandished. Hiccup jumped back in his seat and Stoick cried out in protest. Gobber, who had been hovering in the shadows, seized Cauli's knife hand with a hooked arm attachment, wrenching the knife free and shoving her back in her seat. Cauli shrieked.

"Enough!" Stoick barked, silencing the conference room. Cauli hissed through her teeth and Hiccup reminded himself to breathe. "We are here under the alliance, under a truce, and we have a blight on our doorstep!" Stoick paused for a moment before wrinkling his large nose. "If anyone here feels unable to lead their clan, speak now and I will find a replacement."

The tone was more threatening than inviting, so no one spoke. Stoick sat back and rubbed his eyes.

"Now, if you children are done with your prattling, we have further issues to deal with. Cauli has informed me of the latest attacks and advances made by the Berserkers and the Outcasts, and I need to know what the other clans can offer in terms of defense."

Netmug scoffed. "Nothing we can give you would protect you. These bastards have fire power that extends past your dragons. I've seen dragon breath scorch and scar, but the stuff they have has blown bodies apart. Whole houses were leveled in seconds."

"And nets," Cauli added, almost reluctant to add onto any point made by Netmug. "They have these massive nets carried by equally massive dragons. They're made from metal, and riddled with hooks to keep anything trapped from moving."

"And poison," Barb murmured. "Poison that'll rot your insides until there's nothing leftâ€|"

Hiccup looked over to her and wanted to cross to her, toâ€| give her a hug, maybe.

"How long until they attacked after they were poisoned?" Hiccup asked. Barb looked up.

"Five or six," she replied.

"Four for us," Cauli added.

"Eight," Nutmeg grunted.

Hiccup swallowed. The Outcasts would have taken out the other clans first to get to Berk, to make it defenseless.

"The patternâ€|" Hiccup breathed, "would make us next within the next night. Maybe tonight."

"If there was a pattern," Netmug growled. "They didn't kill Stoick."

"They tried to kill my son," Stoick retorted harshly.

"Then how is he alive?" Barb asked. "We tried everything to revive our parentsâ€|"

Hiccup squirmed in his chair. "About one week ago, Astrid, my wife, accidentally ingested the poison that was meant for me."

Stoick turned to Cauli as Barb sucked a breath in. "We sent a scout asking about a spoon because that was where the poison had been stored, within a spoon carved in an Eastern fashion."

"And I would have told you all our carvers had been kidnapped by the Outcasts over the years," Cauli said sharply. "And if I'm not mistaken, I saw Astrid today before this meeting."

Hiccup twisted his mouth as they waited for an explanation. He cleared his throat and explained to the leaders about Rose, and how she saved Astrid's life with a bond that burned the poison out of her. Barb was fixated on the story when it lead to how he got his own bond on his wedding night. He concluded with the dragons believing Hiccup was the Saviour. Netmug kept his eyes on the table and Cauli had a hand clenched in a fist.

"This Rose child," Cauli murmured, "is not from Berk, is she?"

Stoick shook his head. "No, but her lands were the first to be razed, long before yours."

Hiccup looked at his father subtly. He wasn't exactly lying, but confessing she was of Outcast origin would not be wise when tensions were so high. It took Stoick effort to stay composed, but the leaders all took the answer and moved onto important conversation.

"Thisâ€| bond," Netmug said. "Can Rose perform thisâ€| ritual on others?"

"I don't know," Hiccup replied. "But we have secured some outside help, some wild dragons willing to defend Berk with us."

The leaders all looked at one another. "I certainly didn't think we would be discussing topics like this when I became leader," Cauli explained tiredly. "I will round up those who can fight."

"Netmug, you will help by reinforcing the Great Hall. I want anyone who can't fight housed there to keep them safe. Barb, I want you in the Hall with the matrons."

The leaders nodded and left, tension still high. Hiccup was the first to leave, the sense of imminent attack pounding on his back. He entered the dim light of the sunset and turned. He watched the people â€" some familiar, others strangers â€" and watched as the Great Hall's old walls slowly being covered by sheets of wood, chunks of metal, surrounded by rocks and barricades. The Great Hall always withstood the dragon attacks of old. Hiccup hoped it could stand up against Alvin and Dagur.

It didn't feel real. It couldn't. Yesterday, Astrid was dead. Her body floated away from him and he watched as his best friend burned against the horizon. Today, she was readying the village for a fight, sending throbs of anxiety in his gut. Hiccup clenched his teeth and stomped towards the trees, where he put his hands on his knees and heaved. This was too much. Too much.

His body expelled whatever food he had eaten, flashes of nets and fire and bodies flashing in his memory. He settled himself for a moment, trying to clear his mind, trying to smack the reality into his head.

Hiccup.

Hiccup spun around. Toothless looked up at him, irises wide and mouth contorted into a shape Hiccup was not familiar with. He was terrified. Hiccup softened and dropped to his knees, the same fear clutching at him. Toothless shoved his head against Hiccup's chest and cooed. Hiccup wrapped his arms around his dragon.

Scared. Fear, Toothless trembled.

He took a moment. "Me too, budâ€|"

Togetherâ€|

Hiccup smiled and felt his throat close with emotion. "We've been through a lot together."

Saviour.

Hiccup looked down at Toothless. For the past few months, that's what he was told. Saviour. The title given to him by the dragons that had all felt the oppression of the Red Death, and now Alvin and Dagur. But to Toothlessâ€| it was something different. He was stranded, alone in blood and in pack, and Hiccup gave him a second chance. Together, they saved each other. Hiccup was truly Toothless' saviour, and vice versa. It was a debt they could never stop repaying, and it made the reason to fight finally clear. There were other dragons out there begging for a second chance, and it was up to Hiccup to fight for that chance.

* * *

><p>"The dragons are ready," Rose said quickly, running to join Hiccup as he tweaked his shield at the forge. Hiccup nodded and put his tools away. Rose peered at the shield with interest.<p>

"It's beautiful."

"Thank you," Hiccup said quietly, running a cloth over the shield.

It was designed to be much more than a simple shield. It started off being a simple carpentry project. Since then, it was plated with Gronckle Iron, a picture of Toothless painted on the front. The centre compartment could open and release a grappling line and hook, the rim could split into a small catapult for rocks, the entire body could open into two pieces with a rope for a crossbow and sling shot,

and the plating could reflect light and repel dragon fire.

He pulled the shield over his head and secured it across his back. He reached over the table to the side drawer and opened it, revealing another project he hadn't quite finished.

The sword shined against the orange light of the forge. As long as his arm and as wide as three fingers, Hiccup picked up the sword and weighed it in his hand. Rose watched Hiccup look at it closely, running his thumb down the blade. Rose squinted at the metal.

"I never took you for a sword fighter," she noted.

"I'm not," Hiccup said sourly. "I made this as a gift for someone â€“ anyone, really â€“ but I never thought it would be actually used."

He looked at the hilt and saw the button he installed there. Johann had shipped in some sort of oil years ago for Berk's Great Hall to keep the fires burning. Hiccup had nabbed some and found a way to store it in the hilt. The button would release it, and any spark or flame would light it, creating a torch, or a flaming sword. Hiccup pulled an empty sheathe from a bucket and forced the sword into it, securing it around his hips. He didn't like the feel of it. Astrid was always much better with weapons. Hiccup was always better at running around until his attacker got tired or something equivalent.

But he had Toothless. He always had to remind himself that. It made him stand taller.

Hiccup left Rose at the forge to tinker with some scrap metal and looked around his village. The paths were getting scarce with people, most having fled to the Great Hall. The dungeons below the earth would serve as ample protection, and a tunnel to the far side of the island had been reopened earlier that day. Anyone unable to fight would be kept there until the threat was over.

He heard a squeal and snapped around to see Snowdrop wriggling in Astrid's arms, trying to get free. She bit Astrid's arm. Astrid gasped and dropped Snowdrop, who scrambled to Hiccup's legs, grabbing him and sobbing into his pants.

"No!" Snowdrop screamed. "I don't wanna hide in the dark, I don't know what's going on!"

Astrid pulled Snowdrop away and looked at her.

"You need to be brave, and you need to stay hidden," Astrid told her. "There are bad people coming, and they want our land. We have to protect it."

"But you're fighting," Snowdrop sobbed, "and so is Hup, and I'm scared!"

"Hiccup and I will be alright," Astrid said.

"STOP LYING TO ME!" Snowdrop screamed. Astrid stared, dumbfounded, at her sister. "You died last time, and now you're leaving me AGAIN!"

Astrid pulled her body against hers, holding her tightly. She rocked back and forth, trying to breathe, and Hiccup wrapped his arms around the two of them. Astrid wriggled her fingers to clutch at one of Hiccup's sleeves. "We're going to be alright," Hiccup repeated. "We have to be."

"No!" Snowdrop sobbed. "No, no, no no no no no!"

"Snow, listen to me," Astrid said firmly, holding her face still. "You're going to the Great Hall tonight because bad people are coming, okay?"

Snowdrop sobbed again.

"I'm not lying to you anymore, you're a big girl. So what's going to happen is you're going to the Great Hall. Stoick is going to protect the children and the sick and elders, and he's going to lead you through a series of tunnels."

"Tunnels?" Snowdrop sniffed.

"Yes," Astrid replied with a small smile. "And those tunnels are going to lead you to the other side of the island, all the way to a small bay surrounded by cliffs and sand; no one will follow you there, so I need you to go with everyone else."

Astrid grabbed Snowdrop's hand and kissed it three times. "Do this, and I will meet you on the other side, okay? Hiccup and I will fly and meet you there and we will take you home."

"You promise?" Snowdrop choked.

A matron ran over to the family and looked to the sky. "The sun is setting. I need to take her."

The matron grabbed Snowdrop.

"No, wait!" Snowdrop cried. "Promise me! Astrid! Promise me!"

Astrid turned away and pulled away from Hiccup. He stared at her back as she kept her shoulders tense, trying to block out the sound of Snowdrop's cries, knowing she was writhing around, trying to stay out of the Great Hall that would protect her from the looming doom coming her way.

Hiccup closed his eyes for a moment, his stomach flipping, before following her.

They climbed the hill behind the matron and joined the rest of the fighters, who helped close the doors painfully, the Great Hall sealing with a large crash. From the inside, the matrons locked the doors with as many beams as they could, echoing behind Astrid and Hiccup as they returned to their home.

They entered the house silently, both terrified as the darkness swallowed them. They went to their room, to the wardrobes across from their bed, pulling their riding suits and gifted plate armour free from the dust. Astrid didn't say a word as she shakily pulled her clothes off, readying herself for armour that she hadn't worn in

years. It had been reinforced with metal plating that Hiccup had initially made as a hobbyist project. Hiccup watched tiredly as Astrid's bare back tensed in the firelight, her muscles moving nervously beneath her new skin. She shivered.

Hiccup wrapped his arms around her waist.

"No matter whatâ€œ I love you. Forever."

He let the words hang in the air, kissing her ear delicately.

She turned around and kissed him gently, her face damp. He tangled his fingers in her hair as he kissed her harder. She held onto him for dear life as she pulled his shirt over his head, kissing him as if it was the last time she ever would. Her muffled tears turned into gasping moans as they fell onto the bed, trying desperately to forget the ships that were approaching, the men that were arming themselves, the dragons that were stretching their wings.

They searched each other, gave into each other, and came together as one entity, desperate to make time stop, to start a family like they had always wanted to, to stay safe forever. But time went on, and they peeled from each other silently. They slipped into their armour quietly, Hiccup tugging Astrid's buckles and belt tight, their faces flushed. Hiccup handed Astrid her war axe, a replacement for the one last at sea where her body had burned, and Astrid secured Hiccup's multi-tasking shield to his back. She ran her hand over the painting of Toothless.

They looked at each other again, and Astrid's eyes drifted to the Nadder scale around his neck. She touched it gently. Hiccup kissed Astrid's brow as she tucked the scale into the safety of his suit. Hiccup pushed the Night Fury scale around her neck under her shirt, and the two stood silently as the night got darker and darker.

"I love you, too," Astrid whispered to his throat. Hiccup held her close and breathed deeply.

They stood still for what felt like an eternity that wasn't quite long enough. Astrid tore away painfully and climbed the ladder to the dragon door, clambering onto the roof and meeting Stormfly above. Hiccup followed her and entered the night sky. It was dark and quiet, and familiarly peaceful. They breathed it in, those last moments of tranquility, before Toothless crawled towards them, nervous and vibrating. Hiccup leaned towards him and tightened his saddle, tinkering with his buckles pointlessly.

Astrid secured a sack of weapons to Stormfly's leg before the Nadder jerked and twisted their head to the sky, eyes wide. Astrid tensed and pressed her palms to her head. Hiccup jumped and reached out to her before an image slammed into his head. Thousands of ships manned to the teeth, dragons flying towards the island, silent cackles filling the breezy air.

Saviour! an unfamiliar voice screamed, clear in his mind from the mind of another dragon. Fear struck the back of his head, the need to run, his stomach dropping into his feet.

He shook his mind clear and flung an arm out to Astrid, about to warn her, when something hit their house, a deafening sound and terrifying

rumble sending the two sprawling towards the edge of the roof. Hiccup began sliding down the roof, and Astrid grabbed his wrist to keep him from tumbling to the ground. It went silent.

"Don't move!" she hissed, her breaths whizzing out of her mouth. Hiccup froze and listened, the night quiet again.

"What was that?" Hiccup whispered as Toothless and Stormfly bared their teeth to the sky, scared. Astrid didn't know, but it wasn't fire. It wasn't above them. It came from below.

20. The Battle of Berk Part I

Oh my goodness, guys. This weekend is the opening weekend for How to Train Your Dragon 2. Have you gotten your tickets? Don't spoil anything and I promise I won't after I see it tomorrow! The soundtrack, the visuals, everything. Inspiration is in the air!

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* * *

><p>Chapter Twenty: The Battle of Berk Part I

Another crash rocked their home, violent and jarring, cracking the foundations and collapsing one half of it into the ground. Astrid pulled Hiccup up as timber splintered, and the two leapt onto their dragons, the roof falling from under them as their dragons jumped to the safety of the air. They looked behind them to see their house fall into a pit in the earth, created by hungry and wild dragons thirsty for blood, in a matter of measly minutes.

Hiccup remembered how Alvin had found a way to make a Whispering Death submissive, thousands of teeth eating rock and root and wood until nothing was left. Seeing them crawl from beneath their house made him sick to his stomach, the creatures slithering through the dust left behind. Astrid grabbed the war horn from her belt, watching in terror as the Whispering Deaths began running down the hill towards the village, and released all her air into it. The blow shattered the calm of night, waking everyone up, making the people of the alliance startle awake and grab their weapons as one, two, four, seven Whispering Deaths crawled towards the houses.

Hiccup dove immediately and Toothless fired shots towards the dragons, the light making them hiss and whine, diving back into the safety of the ground. Men and women ran into the square, weapons drawn, as something flew above Hiccup's head. He ducked and turned violently, and saw Ruffnut and Tuffnut on Barf and Belch, banking back to meet with him.

"What's going on?" Tuffnut asked quickly.

"Whispering Deaths, six or seven of them," Hiccup said quickly. "We need light, lots of it. I need them scared."

"Got it!" the twins replied simultaneously, whirling around. They began lighting the paths, showing the foot soldiers where to go and where they were. Hookfang jumped into the village centre and lit himself on fire, charging for the creatures as they tried over and

over to attack. Fishlegs meanwhile was feeding Meatlug rocks by the forge, loading her up with the fuel she needed.

"Hiccup!" Astrid cried. She hovered next to him, panting. "They're going to tear this island apart!"

"I know," Hiccup replied frantically. He was about to continue, to give some direction, some advice, before he saw the tiniest movement behind her head. He didn't know what it was, the slight snap of movement, the shadow, growing ever-nearer.

"ASTRID!" he screamed. Toothless lurched forward, putting himself in the way of Astrid and the object, barely stopping the arrow from hitting her. It hit his shield and bounced off it with a loud clang. He looked over his shield, and saw the speckle of shadows over the water, the sea spattered with tiny dots. Ships lined the darkened ocean, and one landed at the docks, silent.

"It was a distraction," Hiccup gasped, rearing back. "Get to the docks!" he yelled to the soldiers below him. "They're at the docks!"

Astrid flew forward, slicing through the air and illuminating the ships with her fire. Men clad in heavy armour, the Skrill painted upon them in paint red as blood, drew their weapons as they raced over the wooden docks up towards the stairs leading up to Berk. Stormfly kept lighting the boats on fire, trying to slow them down. But hundreds of ships pressed forward. Astrid begged Stormfly to keep lighting them, until the Nadder wrenched back and spun away, tearing back towards the houses.

"Stormfly!" Astrid cried.

Behind_! Stormfly replied. Astrid turned her head and saw more shadows, shadows in the sky, growing ever nearer. Dragons, hundreds of them, flew towards the island carrying massive objects — chains, axes, boulders — Astrid called out to warn Hiccup ahead of her as he gave orders to the soldiers below, when a blinding light struck Stormfly's wing. Stormfly shrieked as the fiery syrup danced over her scales, coating the thin, delicate parts of her wing. She began to fall out of the sky.

"It's okay, no no, easy!" Astrid said, trying to regain control, even though she heard Stormfly screaming in pain in mind and body, before she crashed into the ground. Astrid's body flung forward, over Stormfly's head, crashing into the soil. The air flew out of her lungs as her back slammed into and across the ground, scraping her shoulders and back. She rolled over and over, clawing at the ground to stop herself before she tumbled over the edge of the cliff. The sheer drop made her throat seized before she landed on the wood of the docks. Her vision went black for a moment, the sounds around her muffling slightly.

Fall_? Stormfly shrieked in her mind, shoving the pain aside to see if she was alright. Astrid grimaced, her body aching. She couldn't breathe, only stare at the sky. Through her teary eyes, she saw a dragon fly overhead, then another. More dragons, some she didn't recognize as being dragons either because of their race, or because they were mutilated. And they carried huge objects in their claws.

She forced herself to roll over, coughing and trying to regain her breath. A fall onto the docks like that should have mangled her, but the blood in her veins flowed hard and hungry, hot and angry. She finally made it to her belly, trying to suck in a breath, choking instead. She saw the blurry outline of her axe nearby, just out of reach, and behind it, the first Berserker ship crashed into the docks. Soldiers leapt over the railing and landed on the wooden docks, racing for the stairs that would lead up the cliff to the houses of Berk. And in between them and those stairs was Astrid.

She bit her lip and growled, finally sucking in a breath, seeing every shape in vivid colour and sharpness. They were racing for her, swords and maces and clubs and daggers drawn, screaming, starving. Astrid tried to reach for her axe as they ran down the dock, coughing and struggling to her knees. She grabbed the handle and felt it familiar in her palm as the first soldier raised a sword to cut her down. She threw her arm up, catching the blade with her blade, twisting it out of the man's hands. Her shaken muscles wrenched within her back, and she screamed as the sword came free, tumbling into the ocean. She kicked the man back and scrambled for the stairs, the army on her heels.

Astrid knew the stairs, and she climbed up them three at a time, her legs burning and her heart racing as explosions lit the night sky. She ducked as a fire ball illuminated the entire village, exploding like Red Death flame. She ran faster as the soldiers raced after her, throwing weapons at her and missing terribly. She made it to the top of the stairs and hurled herself into the heart of the village, waving for the foot soldiers who were all looking up into the sky.

"The stairs!" she cried over the noise. "They're climbing the stairs!"

Cauli looked over, great sword weighed in her huge hands, hair askew and lips bloody. She barked an order to the warriors and warmaidens, who all followed her towards the stairs. Astrid looked over to see where the fire ball had hit, and she caught her breath. Her house. The house her parents had built. It wasn't like the Skrill where it had been on fire for a moment. The whole house had been decimated into a smouldering pile of embers and splintered timber. She only stared at the destruction: the foundations of the house surrounded by an uncountable number of people, all blown apart into shattered bits and pieces. She thought of the time she had spent nailing that roof back together, working her hands to raw flesh, keeping the last memories of her parents alive as Hissup slept through the healing of his wounds. And now it was gone, beyond repair, surrounded by blood.

"Astrid!" Cauli screamed. Astrid couldn't move. Something sharp hit her shoulder, sinking into the flesh, nicking the bone, sending her body smashing into the ground. A huge arrow jutted through her shoulder under her collarbone, and she screamed, pain and shock and grief and terror all shooting from her mouth. Cauli leapt over her body and struck a soldier down, nearly cutting him in half. Blood flew in indiscernible directions before Cauli's soldiers took over so Cauli could get her hands on Astrid. She lifted Astrid with difficulty, dragging her towards the forge and away from the mouth of the stairs.

She threw her sword to the ground and eased Astrid against a stone wall.

"Breathe, Astrid!" Cauli barked. Astrid realized she hadn't been, her breaths light and terrified.

"Those people ..." Astrid stammered.

"Are dead," Cauli interrupted. "There is no saving them, so forget about them for now."

"Astrid!" a voice called from outside. Gobber limped in and hustled over. He leaned next to Astrid and cupped the back of her head with his hand. Cauli left to fight again, screams and cries filling the sky. Gobber gave Astrid a shake.

"What were you doing out there?!" Gobber said, pulling her pauldron off her arm. Her chest was wet, the wound bleeding more than she thought. She couldn't breathe.

"Fire," she stammered. "They blew it up, those people, they're all dead, everyone's dead!"

Gobber shook her again, and she felt the arrow. She hissed.

"Listen to me!" Gobber growled. "You have an arrow stuck in your shoulder, can you feel it?"

"I ..." "

"Can you feel it?!" Gobber yelled, twisting the arrow.

"YES!" Astrid shrieked.

"Good," he said. His eyes were intense, his mouth tight and his body vibrating. He had blood up his arm, his sword hand drenched in it. "I'm going to pull the arrow out, alright? And you're going to keep fighting, alright?"

"Gobber ..." "

"I trained you to be a hunter, remember that? To fight dragons?"

Astrid nodded quickly, breathing hoarsely. "Yes."

"You were the top of that class. You can see weaknesses, you can exploit them, take them down."

Astrid shook her head and hiccupped. "Those w-were dragons, not people, I don't want to kill people."

Gobber softened. "Nobody likes killing people, m'dear. But you have to if you ever want to see that sister of yours. You're taking down those who would take her away, and I know you don't want that. And think of the family you want to have, the children you are fighting for."

Astrid sucked in a breath.

"You need to find those weak spots. They're just like dragons; under the arms, those legs. You keep moving so they can't hit you. You are quick, you use anything you can as a weapon, and you don't let anyone reach the Great Hall, understand?"

She didn't have time to agree before Gobber yanked the arrow out of her shoulder, a spurt of blood following it. She almost screamed, but choked instead, as Gobber began tying fabric around it, tighter and tighter. She bit her lip and growled against the pain, her blood growing hot and violent. She needed a weapon, she needed to fight. She needed to focus on protecting the present and the future instead of worrying about the past. She could mourn later. She would fight now.

Gobber hoisted her to her feet, and looked at her again. "Don't let them get to the Great Hall," he repeated. "We need to buy the villagers enough time to make it across the island!"

Astrid nodded once, scared, breathing shallowly. And she ran. She ran out into the main square, her arm numbing from the pressure of her make-shift bandage. She felt new instincts rolling and roaring through her veins, her dragon blood showing her openings and escapes and weaknesses like a mentor. A Berserker boy ran to her, arms raised, fingers around a sword. Astrid ducked, faster than a Nadder, and without really intending to, the blade of her axe sliced his leg. The boy fell with a blood curdling shriek, and Astrid silenced it with one more swing of her weapon.

She wavered for a moment, the body twitching on the ground, bloody with fleshy bits and goo she didn't recognize. She felt sick.

Down, Stormfly croaked in her mind. She straightened her back and snapped back to reality. Astrid left the body in the mud, running away from the smell of iron and the sight of red, and found her dragon behind a house.

The first thing she noticed was the smell of meat. Cooked meat. Astrid's instincts flew away and her arms began to shake. Her Nadder, her beautiful Deadly Nadder, hung in the shadows. Astrid dropped her sword and leaned next to her. Her wing, still sticky and steaming from the fiery sap that coated it, had been charred. Astrid suppressed a cry as Stormfly wheezed and groaned. The wing that always cramped and seized was next to useless. She didn't understand. Dragon skin was impossible to burn.

Astrid cradled Stormfly's head in her lap, trying to hold her, to comfort her among the loud noises and bright explosions. "It's okay," she whimpered. "I'm here."

No. Go. Saviour. Spirit Weaver, Stormfly replied painfully. I cannot fly.

"I'm not leaving you!" Astrid yelled.

Yes, you are, Stormfly said. I have my flame. They have theirs. They are almost at the Hall. You must buy our people some time.

Astrid sucked back another wave of nauseous tears. "Noâ€|

please."

Stormfly roared and snapped at her rider, in pain and angry and desperate. Astrid cried out and scrambled back to avoid her jaws. She looked at her one more time, her dragon huddled in the dark, and forced herself to run away. It tore her heart out, but she felt Stormfly with her. She was safe behind the houses for now. Other houses had been decimated, people were dead, and Berserkers and Outcasts were climbing the muddy hill to the Great Hall, pushing the alliance soldiers back. Astrid forced her legs to move, hoping she could meet Cauli and the others before it was too late.

* * *

><p>Hiccup soared through the air, sweating profusely under his suit. Hiccup could hardly breathe, his heart racing out of his chest. A rogue dragon was on their tail. Toothless wheezed as he flew faster and faster.</p>

"C'mon, bud, lose him!" Hiccup screamed over the howling wind. Toothless groaned and dove towards the water. The rogue dragon behind him, a Deadly Nadder with red skin and a broken spirit, raced after them, spewing fire at them. Hiccup twisted back and forth, the two of them working in sync. Through their bond, they knew how to fly better than they had before, Hiccup moving his foot just as Toothless banked or dove.

The water emerged from the clouds. There were ships below them, torchlights dancing on the docks, barrels full of fiery syrup that lit Berk on fire against the midnight backdrop of the sky. Arrows doused in the sticky flame shot up to the Night Fury that barreled toward them, and they lurched out of the way just in time, the heat searing Hiccup's cheek as it soared by. It hit the dragon behind him in the chest, and the creature screamed a terrifying and disgusting scream. Toothless leveled out and shot back up away from the ships that tried to shoot him out of the sky. The Nadder fell, body aflame, crashing into a ship. The flames lit the barrels on fire and exploded, an entire ship destroyed in a matter of seconds.

"The fire they have, it's flammable!" Hiccup growled to Toothless.
"Like oil!"

Two shots left, Toothless groaned. Hiccup ducked as more fire shot passed them.

They twisted around, Hiccup's stomach slamming into his back as they dove down, down, down towards the ships again. Hiccup thought it and Toothless did it: a shot hit another ship, sitting closer to another as they met the docks. The barrels lit again, and lit the barrels on another ship, and another and another.

The explosion as dozens of ships blowing up deafened Hiccup and singed his hands.

It worked better than expected. He was thankful for his suit against the heat as they flew out of the way of the cloud blooming upwards, another dragon flying after him. A Whispering Death writhed after him and Toothless flew forward with exhaustion. Hiccup couldn't catch his breath, his thoughts barely making sense, when Hiccup blinked.

"Where is Astrid?" he asked quickly.

Hiccup! Toothless cried. Hiccup gasped as Toothless barreled over to the side, a ball of sticky fire missing him by mere inches, sending the two of them spiralling out of control. They hit a sea stack and Hiccup was flung to the side, the rope tethering him to Toothless snapping apart. He curled up as he rolled over and over. He hit the side of his head on a rock and saw stars as his body came to a limp halt on the very edge of the stack.

HICCUP! Toothless screamed, seeing his rider groggily bring his hand to his bleeding head. The Whispering Death bore down on them. Toothless bared his teeth and fired his last shot to the dragon, who twisted out of the way. Hiccup made it to his knees shakily, almost hurling, his head throbbing. Toothless was screaming in his mind as the Whispering Death got closer and closer. Toothless closed the distance between him and Hiccup, fanning out his wings to protect him, gnashing his teeth and slinking back on his haunches before another body got in the way.

Jade wings and a huge body flew in the way, a massive wild Scauldron roaring and gnashing her teeth. Rose ran down the beast's neck, leaping onto the spiky back of the Whispering Death. She screamed as she brought a length of chain she found at the forge around the dragon's throat, pulling back with all her weight, trying to keep his head from burrowing back into the stone. Hiccup looked up and saw the Scauldron sink her teeth into the Whispering Death's throat, tearing it out and flinging the fleshy chuck to the side. Twitching and gargling, its body was twisted around by Rose, who forced it over the edge and into the ocean. She made it to her bare feet, blood spattering her cheek and tears in her clothing, the length of chain still in her hands.

"Are you alright?"

Hiccup nodded and stumbled to his feet, holding the side of his head. He felt the sticky blood slime through his hair, but he was okay. Rose dismounted and ran to him. She grabbed his face and he shied away, not wanting to be touched. Rose overpowered him and pressed her hand to his head, much to his dislike.

"The bleeding should stop faster than usual," Rose said. "Hold still."

"The dragons?" Hiccup asked.

"They're taking down the other dragons so the people can deal with the people," Rose replied. "Without riders, they are free to do what they must."

Hiccup gulped, thinking about the throat of the Whispering Death. He had never seen a dragon do that to another. Rose lifted her palm, the bleeding stopped. She looked over the water, finally taking a moment to look at those ships dotting over the surface.

"I never thoughtâ€| Berserkers, Outcasts, working together."

"Their ships carry barrels of sticky oil or something," Hiccup remarked, pressing his palm to the fresh gash on his head. "Hit them,

they blow up."

"Sun Sapâ€œ! I'll tell the others," Rose recited quickly. "They'll strike there first, keep the rogue dragons away, buy you enough time to escape."

Hiccup looked up as Toothless perked his fins into the air.
"What?"

Rose, on her way back to the Scauldron, looked back. "You need to get to safety."

"No, I'm not going anywhere," he retorted, climbing back onto Toothless' back. He went to secure himself, forgetting the tether had been snapped. He picked up the pieces and tied them together. Rose frowned.

"The whole point is to keep you safe!" Rose yelled. Hiccup sneered.

"And my point is to keep Berk safe. I'm safe with my dragon and I'm not going anywhere until they leave."

"They won't leave until everyone is dead!"

"Rose!" Hiccup barked. She shut her mouth and swallowed.

He noticed how young she truly was, fourteen winters old, huddling in clothing too loose for her, her short hair making her look like a boy. Her famished cheeks under her wide green eyes made him look down at her with a sad anger. She looked so tiny up against the Scauldron who had adopted her, blood around its jaws and down its slender neck.

"I am not leaving until I know my family and people are safe."

Rose grimaced. "But the dragons â€œ"

The sea stack lurched to the side, rumbling through their bodies and making Rose stumble to her knees. Toothless crouched and the Scauldron flew into the air as the sea stack began to crumble. Three Whispering Deaths smashed through the rock and hollowed out the stack. It began to crumble apart into the ocean below.

"Rose!" Hiccup yelled as the rock began to split. She made it to her feet and scrambled to him. He grabbed her wrist and hauled her into the air, Toothless leaping off the stack as the last of it fell to pieces. He grunted and pulled Rose behind him, flying back into the clouds. Fire balls illuminated the clouds as they approached, as if there were dragons already waiting for them. Toothless shrieked as the clouds lit on fire in front of his face, and Rose and Hiccup gasped as the heat burned their eyes. Three Monstrous Nightmares, bodies on fire, bore down on them, snapping at them.

"Fly to the forest! Down, down!" she yelled. Hiccup dove immediately, away from the clouds, Toothless folding his wings to shoot out of the sky like a meteor. Hiccup pushed his body down over Rose to gain speed, but the ground was approaching fast.

"I have to level out!" Hiccup yelled.

"Not yet!" Rose replied.

Hiccup began to sweat the ground getting closer and closer and closer.

"Rose!"

"Not yet!"

He could smell more forest than ocean, the green getting closer.

"Rose!" he screamed as the distance closed between them.

"Now!"

Hiccup threw his weight back, hands clutching at the saddle of dear life, Rose squeezing the air out of chest with her twig-like arms. Toothless groaned as his body managed to barely scrape over the trees. The Nightmares began to level out behind them before screams filled the air below. Camouflaged Changewings grabbed onto the burning dragons out of the trees, spraying their acid in their faces and blinding them, unlatching from them as they crashed into the trees.

Hiccup reminded himself to breathe as they curled around the trees and back over the water, over a cluster of ships. Toothless was too tired, his wings shaking, so they couldn't turn fast enough as another sticky ball of fire shot for them, catching Hiccup's leg, spattering his thigh with the burning ooze. Hiccup grunted, pulling Toothless back, flying back into the trees. He thought the suit would protect him, but it burned through it like paper, catching his skin. They flew for only a minute, quickly gaining the cover, before Hiccup cried out in pain, forcing Toothless to land.

"My leg," Hiccup choked. Rose leapt off, her legs wobbly, pulling him from the Night Fury quickly. Toothless collapsed over the frozen soil, wheezing and folding his wings, shaking from tooth to tail fin. Rose pulled Hiccup forward, his leg burning fiercely. They fell over an embankment into the small stream, and the two cursed as the cold pierced their clothes. Hiccup fell into the water, shivering uncontrollably, as Rose reached under the surface and pulling the cooling sticky orange goop from his leg. She hissed as it burned her fingertips, throwing it away and swatting it from her skin.

"What is that?!" Hiccup cursed.

"Sun Sap," Rose growled as she pressed herself onto Hiccup's leg. "The Outcasts used it in the caves to keep their torches lit."

She pressed her hands down on him and he cursed over and over. He heard another explosion and looked towards where he thought the village sat.

"We have to get back," Hiccup spat. He tried to get up, but Rose pushed him down.

"No, this stuff burns hotter than dragon fire, you have to keep it

cool. Toothless needs a rest."

Hiccup almost argued, but bit his tongue, and for a moment, he squeezed his eyes shut and tried to listen to nothing but the stream. Rose watched him. She swallowed and felt a trickle of warmth on her face. She brought her wet hand to her upper lip, thinking nothing, until she saw blood on her fingers from her nose. She stared at it and swallowed, wiping the rest away and washing it away in the stream before Hiccup could see, trembling slightly.

21. The Battle of Berk Part II

Hello, everyone! It certainly has been a craaaazy week! How to Train Your Dragon 2 has finally come out and it was phenomenal. I watched it twice since it came out and I'll probably watch it many, many more times. The music and the animation were superb. It is a film where I had to see it twice - once to get over years of waiting and twice to really enjoy it. It wasn't a sequel pulled out of an arse and bedazzled with millions of dollars, it was actually a fantastic installment. Only two more years until the third one comes out (and, keeping in the trend of today's franchises, that third movie may be split into two). If you HAVE seen it, feel free to PM me about your thoughts! Don't post a review, I don't want anyone reading a spoiler. If you HAVEN'T, go see it on the big screen!

In terms of this chapter, **I may postpone next week's posting** in order to set up a page for the art I have been working on. It may not happen, and I still have chappies ready to read, I just may drag it out like a horrible person because this chapter is longer than most. I just wanted to let you guys know IN CASE. And I would like to challenge you guys to draw your favourite scene from Reunion or the movies, just to get that inspiration in the air! I have one painting up from Chapter Two on . Enjoy!

* * *

><p>Chapter Twenty One: The Battle of Berk Part II

Astrid screamed and growled, her back grinding into the ground beneath her, her arms trembling as she pushed a Berserker soldier away from her face.

"C'mon, girl, let me stick yah," he grunted, his body writhing against hers. His knife-hand held a double-edged dagger and was coming closer and closer to her throat.

"Get off!" she yelled, trying to keep the blade away from her flesh.

"Not really my style, love," he laughed. He ground his hips into her and Astrid clenched her teeth. She did something Snowdrop would have done, and sank her teeth into the man's wrist. He screamed as she broke the skin, and she twisted them around so she straddled him. He swung with his knife and she bent back, evading it. She grabbed his knife-hand and bent the wrist back, seizing the dagger and driving it into his chest. He gasped and clawed at it as she sneered at him, stabbing him over and over.

"No one calls me love except Hiccup," she spat, slamming the dagger in one more time. She left him to bleed, picking up another axe along the way.

Astrid tore through soldiers faster than she could think. Spitelout and Fishlegs kept their dragons on the ground, snapping and razing as many people as they could. Her ears rung as screaming filled her mind, her body aching tremendously. She could hardly breathe, but she didn't give up. There was no way she could, there was no way the villagers had made it to the far side of the island through the tunnels.

She ran higher up the hill, managing to stay ahead of the enemy and keeping herself between them and the Great Hall. She saw Cauli and Netmug fighting next to each other, a miracle somehow, against someone much, much bigger. Distracted, she tripped over a body and landed on her chest. She looked up at the fight above her.

His body was the same as Stoick's, his hair braided at the base of his neck. A huge unkempt beard framed his snarling mouth. His huge fists wielded a club and a sword, his arms laced with scars. His voice bellowed as he swung his weapons, his iron armour glinting in the fire light, lined with dragon teeth. His eyes were black and full of rage, and he swung his club around his head, breaking Netmug's arm and sending him rolling down the hill. Cauli, weak and injured herself, gritted her teeth and swung at his back, but he spun around and caught her sword with his. Metal clanged against metal, and he smashed his head into her face. She slumped, limp, and the man turned.

Alvin the Treacherous looked down the hill to see the carnage below him, a smile stretched over his face showing his few teeth and blackened gums. He scanned the ground, Astrid remaining still by instinct, and he saw her as another body. He turned and walked up to the Great Hall, looking up and down at the huge doors boarded up. Astrid jumped up and limped towards him, her shoulder still aching.

"Hey!" she screamed over the noise. Alvin stopped and shifted his body around slowly, looking over at her with an eyebrow raised. She was holding her axe so tight, her knuckles hurt. Her arm shook and she felt blood form herself and others drying on her skin as the two looked at each other.

"Yes?" Alvin asked, annoyed.

"Step away from the doors," Astrid snarled.

Alvin laughed and stepped away a single step, resting a hand on a hip, his cackling wheezy and gurgling.

"Andâ€¦ why should I?" he asked, lowering his head and cocking it slightly. He twitched his club and Astrid pretended she didn't notice. Instead, she crouched.

"Because," she spat, "this is not your place."

He balked for a second before cracking into bouts of noiseless laughter, laughing so hard he couldn't breathe and made him drool.

"Oh!" he gasped, trying to stop, "you're funny, girl!"

Astrid shivered at the sight while he lifted his weapons as if beckoning her forward. The wind caught his smell and blew it into her face. She wrinkled her nose as she smelled death and decay and rot. She was about to scream at him again before hands reached behind her and seized her, a hand twisting her arm back and another clamped over her mouth. She heard a man chuckle horribly in her ear, and she writhed against him. Alvin stepped towards her, club in hand, his eyes hateful.

"You see," he said with a raspy voice, "I know this is not my place."

She grunted and tried to kick her feet up, but the man holding her was strong and tall, wearing plate armour that held her like a vice. Alvin got close to her face and smiled.

"I have spent my whole life knowing it's not my place. Outcast Island? You think that's a place where people come from? No. It's a place that people are left with when they are abandoned, thrown out to starve and die. I have nowhere, so therefore, I can go wherever I goddamned well please."

She felt his breathe on her face and couldn't help but shake. Alvin watched as Astrid bore her eyes into his. He squinted and twisted his mouth.

"I know you, I've seen you," Alvin noted. Astrid diverted her eyes and wriggled again, but Alvin grabbed her hair and wrenched her head upwards, making her face clear to his sights, her mouth freed from the man behind her. The hand moved to her throat instead and she choked, but tried to keep her jaw clenched. He raised his brows and gave an 'ahh' sound, recognizing her.

"You're that annoying little blonde bitch that always helped Hiccup, aren't you?" Astrid refused to answer. Alvin grinned. "I see it now. You had the Nadder. Always barkin' orders, always hoverin' close by in case he needed you. But now that you need him!"

Alvin looked around dramatically. "Oh! Where is he? Oh, gods have mercy!"

The man behind her laughed at the theatrics, Alvin breaking into more laughter. Then he shrugged and stroked a calloused and dry hand over her cheek, grabbing her jaw.

"There's no finer feelin' knowing he won't be here to stop me. I heard about the funeral."

He craned her head back harder and Astrid hissed as her neck began to cramp. He was gnashing his teeth towards her mouth, shaking with adrenaline and loathing.

"I heard how he dropped like a fly, the poison rotting his insides out until he was nothin' but a useless pile of jelly on the floor. How does it feel? How does it feel to have him slip through your fingers, to watch him burn like he burned me?"

He held her and breathed heavily into her face before something caught his attention above. He looked up to the sky, a dragon flying above. The pink and orange Nadder groaned and trembled. Scars riddled its body, some not entirely healed, and the sounds it made were pained and heartbroken. Astrid didn't want to see the poor creature struggle, but at the same time she immediately noticed the Nadder was half the weight it should have been, and she was missing her crown of spines. She felt vomit rise up in her throat. It hovered unstably over the Great Hall, before croaking and lighting the doors on fire. Astrid shrieked as the Great Hall went up like a pile of dried straw, and Alvin howled with cheer. The dragon whined and flew off. He turned to Astrid again and gestured to the burning structure.

"This, this, is what I always wanted! How does it feel?"

The man behind Astrid roared with lustful merriment. Alvin joined in, thrusting his hands into the air, his black silhouette screaming in the firelight. Astrid sobbed as the Great Hall burned. Snowdrop, Stoick, the old and young. She prayed to every god she knew that they had made it to the far side of the island and closed the boulders over the exit. Only then would they be safe. It didn't stop her from being terrified.

He rolled his shoulders and looked at Astrid one more time, noticing the axe stuck in her hand, her arm twisted to make it useless. He closed the distance between them and wrenched it out of her hand.

"Nice axe," Alvin smiled. "It should do just fine."

He turned to the flames and got as close as he could, smacking the blade into the embers over and over. Astrid twisted and wouldn't stop moving, bucking around like a wild dragon as Alvin cut his way into the Great Hall. She planted her feet and sent all her weight forward, hauling the man over her shoulders and onto the ground. She jumped over him, running after Alvin as he forced his way through the broken and charred wood.

The man grabbed her ankle and stopped her. She tripped and her chest hit the ground, sending the air out of her all over again. She gasped the air back and looked down at the man. Dagur the Deranged sneered at her. His crooked teeth screeched against each other as he jeered at her, his eyes bulging and insane. The tattoo he marked over his face shined from the fire. Astrid kicked her foot, trying to hit his face, but he grabbed her ankle with surprising agility and cranked it over. She rolled to keep it from spraining, and kicked her other foot across his face. He howled as her metal-toed boot hit his teeth, knocking a couple loose.

She scrambled to her feet, holding her stomach, feeling sick and sore all over, her injured shoulder numb. Dagur pulled a knife free from his boot, his huge muscular frame lunging at her. He swung the knife over her belly. She sucked it in and felt the blade whiz by, missing her by a hair. He sliced up and she twisted around to keep it from hitting her chest. He stepped in to bury the metal into her throat and she ducked. He was moving so fast she barely had time to breathe. He kicked her in the gut with his booted foot, making her double over onto the ground. Her abdomen went stiff, and she curled up in a ball, pain rocking through her. He caught her mouth with his toe and it sent her sprawling outward. Her lips were wet with blood. She tried

to breathe as he straddled her, rocking her again with one of his fists. Her vision went dark for a moment, and she couldn't breathe. He closed his hands around her throat and squeezed.

"I have been waiting for this moment for so many years," Dagur seethed as Astrid's face went red. She limply grabbed his wrists, trying to pull them away. "Alvin kept me away from here for so long to wait for the perfect moment. I have been waiting and waiting to get my hands on you and your stupid friends, to choke the life out of them."

Astrid's body began to go limp as Dagur got closer and closer.

"I remember you, Hiccup, the fat one, the loud one, the twins, every single one of you. And now, and now I'm going to watch each one of you die slowly, knowing the last thing you'll hear is my voice."

"Get off her!"

Astrid barely heard the Zippelback roar before it knocked Dagur off her. She sucked in a breath and coughed, rolling over onto her side, breathing in air again and again. Dagur had been knocked a short distance away, Barf and Belch looming over him. The twins, wearing war paint and their armour, hollered at each other. One head snapped at him, but Dagur got to his feet and began running, evading the dragon easily.

The twins knew their dragon had reached its shot limit, but that didn't stop them. The dragon tried to bite into the Berserker, but Dagur was too quick. Tuffnut flew forward. Dagur jumped to the side and swung his knife. Tuffnut went pale. Ruffnut screamed.

"TUFF!" she screamed. Astrid struggled to her feet. Tuffnut pressed his arm over his chest, trying to hold everything in, blood flowing. Barf and Belch whined. Ruffnut jumped down. "Get him out of here! Go! GO!"

The Zippelback left her painfully, flying Tuffnut to the safety of the sky. Ruffnut eyed Dagur and the expression on her face was murderous, the mace in her hand vibrating. Astrid looked between them.

"You," Ruffnut hissed. Dagur grinned and showed every one of his teeth.

"I missed you," Dagur said mockingly. Ruffnut grimaced and shifted her weight. Astrid squinted, wanting to run to the Great Hall but afraid to move. Ruffnut was shaking so much and Astrid had a dreadful feeling in her gut. Dagur turned and looked at Astrid, his insanity overflowing as he giggled. He pointed to Ruffnut.

"You mean you don't know?" Dagur asked Astrid. "Your friend never told you?"

Astrid swallowed. "Ruffnut, get out of here."

But the twin wouldn't move. Astrid had never seen Ruffnut in agony like this, her body wracking with waves of revulsion. Dagur bit his lower lip perversely.

"It was five years ago," he began, "when I found her in the forest, lost and stupid, trying to find her way back to Berk on an island half a day away. And while her idiot of a brother looked under pebbles for her on the other side of it â€""

"Shut up," Ruffnut growled. Astrid felt cold.

"â€" it was so easy to get her on her back, you would think she actually wanted it."

Ruffnut shrieked and dove for him, swinging her mace at Dagur's head. He ducked and rolled to the side. He laughed and grabbed Ruffnut by the throat, forcing his mouth over hers with a vile kiss. Ruffnut jerked around as Dagur pulled away, licking his lips.

"I'm keeping you," he said quietly to Ruffnut.

Astrid, heart racing and curses racing through her head, grabbed a shield attached to the arm of a body and flung it at Dagur. She was stronger than she thought, and it hit Dagur in the back of the head hard enough to bring him to the ground. Ruffnut stumbled back, holding her neck, as Astrid raced to her and grabbed her.

"Ruffnut!" she yelled. Her rider-sister was breathing so violently, her face wet with tears and the veins bulging out of the sides of her head, her eyes fixed on Dagur's unconscious body. Ruffnut met Astrid's eyes and crushed her in an embrace, sobbing into her shoulder. Astrid rocked her back and forth, looking down to the village and seeing nothing but bodies and broken buildingsâ€| and nets. There were nets down in the village centre, full of surviving soldiers, tethered to dragons that were flying them away. Astrid tore away, about to say something, when something slammed into Ruffnut.

Ruffnut gasped as the hook cut through her arm, locking into her. There was a clutch of Berserker soldiers below with crossbows loaded with hooks tied to chain. Ruffnut cried out as they pulled on the chain, dragging her down the hill.

"Hold on!" Astrid screamed, trying to pull on the chain. Ruffnut shoved her away.

"The Hall!" she cried. "Get out of here!"

"No, I'm not letting them take you!"

Dagur stirred next to her, groaning and making it to his knees. Astrid held Ruffnut's face and pressed her forehead to hers, trying to keep the chain from pulling her into the hands of the enemy.

"It's too late," Ruffnut sobbed. "You have to buy them more time!"

Astrid sobbed loudly and sucked in a breath as the chain began to slip out of her bloody hands. Dagur staggered to his feet, trying to remember where he was. Ruffnut shoved Astrid away and the chain went taught, hauling her down the hill toward the nets. Astrid forced herself to turn away as Dagur looked around. He didn't see Astrid

disappear into the Hall, so he began to make his way down the hill, smiling as Ruffnut was shoved into a chain-net that would carry her back home.

* * *

><p>"Keep moving!" Stoick ordered. He had an arm wrapped around Snowdrop, who clung to his neck. He held the back of the pack, urging people to keep running. They had been running constantly for hours. Feet were bleeding and children were sobbing as parents tried to keep pace with the rest of the fleeing villagers. Stoick himself was sweating and he could hardly imagine how everyone else was fairing. Most of them had been injured early that week in the other attacks, and some were not strong enough to keep up.</p>

Half a dozen people had dropped to the ground, unable to continue, and two of those had been left behind. Stoick kept the rest moving. The tunnels were dark and confusing, but Spitelout at the head of the crowd knew the tunnels well. He guided them this way and that as Stoick kept looking over his shoulder for any signs of attack. They were lucky so far.

They were nearing the end of the tunnel before the ground jolted. Many people stopped. They panted and wheezed and held onto each other as their legs trembled. Everyone went silent. Then, another jolt rocked through the tunnel. Some people screams and the ground shook, some people fell. Stoick pulled Snowdrop from his neck and she whimpered. "Stay behind me," he said, pulling his battle axe forth. The rumbling got louder and louder, and people started to scream.

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"Icky?" she asked quietly. Stoick put her down and nudged her away, looking over his shoulder towards where the noise had come from.

"Stay behind me," he said, pulling his battle axe forth. The rumbling returned, like something was trying to bash and claw its way into the tunnel.

The Whispering Death broke through the surface, his head snapping back and forth, hungry. Everyone jumped back and shrieked. "Get to the end of the tunnel!" Stoick bellowed. People sprinted for the end of the tunnel, Stoick pushing people to their feet as the dragon lashed its head around, trying to see the people through blinded eyes. "Go, go! To the sunlight!"

He turned around to face the beast, shoulders ready and teeth clenched, when he noticed Snowdrop on the ground in front of the beast. She must have tripped somehow in the chaos, and she lied frozen in front of the lurking monster that sniffed. Stoick crouched and his back began to sweat.

"Snowdrop," he murmured quietly, keeping his eyes on the dragon that

loomed like a snake ready to attack. "Don't move."

Snowdrop squeaked and pushed herself back on her rump, her boots scraping the stone. The dragon snuffed at the sound. Stoick tensed.

"Don't move," he repeated firmly. Snowdrop rolled onto her belly as Stoick tried to inch his way to her.

"Icky, my leg Â€" Snowdrop sobbed. "It hurts."

"Hush, lass," Stoick breathed, taking another step. "Look at me, let me worry about him."

Snowdrop's tears streaked through the soot on her face, and her tiny teeth clattered. "Help," she whimpered.

Stoick licked his lips. The dragon was staring at him through bleeding eyes, but Stoick knew it could smell him. The tiniest change could set him off and Stoick knew that. He wished Hiccup was there with him.

"Think you can run to me?" Stoick asked. Snowdrop sniffed and shook her head.

"I can't feel my foot," she cried, "Someone stepped on it, it hurts so bad."

Stoick hushed her again. "Stay still, stay quiet. I'm on my way."

He took another step and the dragon hissed. Snowdrop cried out but tried to quiet herself as Stoick flinched. He was so close to her now, the dragon only a Night Fury wingspan away. He got to his knees and reached out to her. Snowdrop reached back, grimacing. Her little cheek was cut and scraped, but she tried to stretch out nonetheless.

But Stoick was never known for being patient. He jumped forward, grabbing her arm and pulling her against him. The dragon shrieked and began twisting after them. Snowdrop screamed as Stoick began running, sprinting for the exit. He quickly put Snowdrop down behind a boulder and he turned just in time to square off with the dragon. Its round mouth riddled with sharp teeth lunged after him, shrieking. Stoick jumped back and swung his axe. The blade barely scraped the dragon before the creature slammed Stoick's body into a wall. He growled and shoved the beast down, using his whole weight to force it to the ground.

"Icky, no!" Snowdrop cried.

He brought his axe back and buried it into the Whispering Death's head. Snowdrop covered her ears as it chortled and writhed around, whining and choking and convulsing. It thrashed back and forth wildly. Stoick held onto his axe as hard as he could as the beast slammed into the wall to throw him off. The air flew out of his body and his grip loosened as the dragon smashed him over and over before slumping to the ground, wriggling. Stoick panted as he pushed the body away from him, freeing him from the wall. The dragon twitched and groaned and twisted around, bearing his thousands of teeth, snapping forward. A tooth caught the chief's forearm, sinking into

the flesh. But before Stoick could strike again, the dragon went limp, its massive head bouncing off the ground, his tooth slipping from Stoick's skin.

It had been years since Stoick had killed a dragon, but he never forgot how to do it. It felt too familiar. He looked at the dragon with a bad taste in his mouth. He ran onward, the smell of dragon blood on his skin repulsive. He thought of his own dragon, and Hiccup and Toothless. He had to do it, he had to kill that one dragon to protect the village. He limped to the boulder and knelt next to Snowdrop, who reached up and wrapped her arms around his neck, hiding under his beard. Her leg was bleeding, crushed under the weight of an adult, and he caught up to the group as the last of them made it to the bay. Many people were stumbling onto the sand of the shore and collapsing from exhaustion. The air was salty and cool, the sky turning a pale blue as the sun began to rise. Spitelout ran over to him, his brow covered in sweat.

"The blood â€" "

"Is not mine," the chief interrupted. "Save for my arm. Nothing serious, my friend."

"Is everyone out?" Spitelout asked.

"I hope so," Stoick grunted, waving to Juniper to take Snowdrop. The matron ran over and took the child gently, Snowdrop crying hysterically.

"Do we close it?"

Stoick nodded strongly and returned to the mouth of the tunnel. He and Spitelout grabbed the boulder next to it and began pushing, closing the mouth of the tunnel with it, sealing them in the bay. He turned and looked up.

"Any riders here?"

"Noâ€|" Spitelout noted. "No one."

Stoick paused before rubbing his mouth. "They're coming, I'm sure of it. They'll be here soon."

Spitelout only stared at his leader. He nodded stiffly as Stoick pressed a palm to his arm, his fist clenched.

* * *

><p>It had only been a moment that Hiccup had his eyes closed. He opened them as Rose put her hand into the water to wash away the blood from her nose. She sniffed and they were quiet for a moment.<p>

"Let's take a look," she murmured.

She lifted his leg from the water. He bit his tongue to keep from cursing as she rested his leg on her knee. She was shivering, but she was careful. The riding suit had melted away around his thigh, and the skin was raw. It oozed blood and looked charred in places. Rose frowned and put it back under the water.

"At least it wasn't your good leg," she muttered. Hiccup's teeth chattered as he sat in the stream, the water around his chest. She kept her hands over his leg, the sleeves of her sweater soaked to the shoulder. They sat there awkwardly.

"Why didn't you tell me," Hiccup said, breaking the silence. Rose looked up slowly.

"About what?" she asked.

"Everything," he replied. "At the wedding. Or you could have gotten better, you could haveâ€¦ you could have, I don't know, fixed yourself so you could just tell someone what was going on."

Rose pursed her lips and looked down again. "I told you why I couldn't tell you at the wedding. They would haveâ€¦" She paused to take in a breath. "They would have killed my mum."

"So?" Hiccup spat. "So?!"

Rose only looked at him with bewilderment. "You're saying I should have? Knowing what they would have done?"

Hiccup shrugged dramatically, the pain shooting up his leg. "Hundreds of people are dead now, Rose! Maybe thousands, because you didn't tell me! All for your mother."

"Hiccup â€"

"No, instead of telling me to at least give us enough time to get ourselves ready for this, you wait, you go back to Outcast Island, and when I find you next to death, you don't even tell me then?!"

Rose backed away in the water slowly, shocked. "The matrons thought I was in pain. They drugged me."

He sniggered. "That didn't stop you from waking up in time to help Astrid."

She closed her eyes and shook her head. Hiccup glared. "Iâ€¦ stayed there because I was scared, okay?"

Hiccup scoffed. "Whatever."

"I was!" Rose repeated, her face pleading with him. He didn't look at her. He could only shake his head.

"You could have told us about the poison, about Alvin and everything! Astrid wouldn't have been poisoned, we wouldn't have lost our â€" I mean, none of this would have happened if you just said something!"

"Lost what?" Rose asked quickly. Hiccup didn't hear her.

"And why me?!"

"What did you lose?"

"Why did you have to bond me?! I get it, I freed a nest, Saviour and all that, but why? Does your mother have something to do with that, too?!"

Rose felt the sting of tears in her eyes. "Hiccup â€“"

Hiccup shook his head again, pushing her hands away from him and feeling his leg. He felt his flesh move under his hand, closing over the wound, and he pulled away, the feeling of it happening against his palm repulsive. His gaze bore into Rose's shadowy silhouette.

"You should have told me," he repeated. "We needed more than a day."

"I was always told Stoick was always prepared," Rose muttered.

"Yeah, five or six years ago. After two, he started relaxing, and after four, he was convinced the Outcasts and the Berserkers were perfectly alright with just leaving us alone!"

"But she said he would never stop fighting!" Rose exclaimed, pleading with him. Hiccup laughed scornfully.

"Who, your mum?" he asked scornfully. "How the hell would she know?"

Rose growled loudly and grabbed her hair, pulling on it, frustrated. "What if you had to choose?" she yelled. "What if you had to choose, knowing your mum would be killed?"

Hiccup shook his head again and forced himself to his feet, his leg healing, but still open and sore. "I'm done, Rose."

Rose crawled over to him, splashing through the icy water. "No! Tell me! What if you had to choose?!"

Hiccup elbowed her away. She fell back into the water, holding her cheek, and Hiccup's heart pounded in his chest.

"My mum is dead!" he yelled.

"She was captured!" Rose screamed back. Hiccup caught his breath and Rose made it to her feet, weighed down and shaking. "Dead and captured are not the same thing! What ifâ€¦ what if she's alive?!"

"And what proof could you possibly have to convince me of that?" Hiccup challenged, his voice breaking.

Rose froze. She looked around and wrapped her arms around herself. Toothless lifted his head from the ground, his fins curling back against his neck. Hiccup looked between them, angry. He wiped his jaw with the back of his hand and turned around, limping towards the embankment, leaving her behind.

"Me." Rose was barely audible over the stream, but Hiccup heard it. He stopped. His back was to her as she let her arms go, giving up. "I am. I'm your proof."

Hiccup couldn't move, his stomach growing cold. Those three words hung in the air like a storm cloud. Toothless slinked over, piercing him with his eyes. Hiccup slowly turned around, the water sloshing around his legs. Rose looked up at him sadly, biting her lip and her eyes wide and begging.

"Can't you see?" she asked hoarsely. Hiccup stepped away, looking at her green eyes, his eyes catching the red in her hair, her complexion, her build, her voice. She stepped towards him again, her hands on her chest, pointing to herself. "The proof is standing right in front of your face, Hiccup."

The night went eerily quiet, the sound of the stream and the two of them panting. Hiccup's legs hitting the back of the embankment, he stared at Rose with his lips parted, silent. Rose sighed shakily.

"Remember at the wedding," she asked, a tear dripping from her jaw into the stream, "how marrying you wouldn't work out for us?"

Hiccup turned away, climbing up the embankment. "Enough," he said, walking away. Rose ran after him.

"Fourteen years ago, she was captured in an Outcast raid, and two moons later she started showing," Rose continued. Hiccup walked faster towards Toothless, who backed away.

Listen to Spirit Weaver, Toothless said firmly. Hiccup gawked at him.

"What?" he asked loudly. Rose grabbed onto his shoulder, spinning him around roughly. She grabbed onto his wrists and held them. They struggled.

"I was born five moons later," she stated, "and the only way to keep me alive was to pretend I was a mistake."

"Get away from me!" he screamed, the words tearing out of him.

"That's why I bonded you, that's why I waited in the matron's house. I knew there was poison on the island, I just didn't know who it would hurt. I knew if I stayed sick, whoever got hurt would be brought there. I thought it would be you or Stoick and I knew they wouldn't let me anywhere near you two when they knew where I came from."

Hiccup pushed her away again, his knees weak. Rose squeaked and looked up at him for a tense moment. Hiccup was shaking, his suit dripping ice water and yet his heart was colder than that. He couldn't breathe, he couldn't see. He shakily fell to the ground, the air whooshing out of him all at once. He wrapped his arms around himself. Rose crouched in front of him, watching him carefully.

"My mother is alive?" Hiccup asked hoarsely.

"Aye," Rose replied. "As far as I know at this pointâ€|"

"And you're trying to tell meâ€| thatâ€|"

Rose rested a hand on his knee gently. He looked up slowly, pale as a ghost. "I'm trying to tell you that I'm your sister."

* * *

><p>Stoick looked over the horizon as the sun crawled closer and closer into the night. The pale blue morning light hung over the remaining villagers as they huddled close together for warmth. Thornado paced back and forth along the short bay shoreline, keeping an eye out for any ships or dragons. So far, they were safe. The chief weaved his way through the villagers. Some were still bleeding, some were fading. Others stayed close together. No one talked above a whisper, wrapping whatever clothing they had on their backs closer around them in the morning chill. He looked away to readjust the bandage that wrapped around the Whispering Death bite pointlessly.</p>

Spitelout sat with his grandson Swamplout, bouncing the small boy on his knee to keep him calm, his other hand on the hilt of his sword. He nodded once to Stoick, who saw Snowdrop sitting in front of the boulder that blocked the tunnel entrance. His face went taught as he knelt next to her.

"What are you doing, lass?" he asked her. Snowdrop shivered but didn't move.

"I'm waiting for Astrid and Hup," she replied. "How will they get through the rock?"

"They're going to fly to us, over the hill and down into the bay when it's safe."

Snowdrop didn't say anything. Stoick awkwardly straightened himself up, rubbing the back of his neck. Valka was always so much better than him when it came to talking to children. She would have known what to say while he was always abrasive or silent. With Snowdrop, he didn't know what to say. He knew that Astrid and Hiccup would return with the others, assuming everything went well. Assuming, he remembered.

Suddenly, many of the villagers tensed as a shadow skittered over the sand. Stoick snapped his head to the sky, his body going tense. Spitelout silently motioned everyone to be quiet, slowly placing Swamplout on the ground and pressing a finger to his lips. A screech broke the humming silence and some villagers cried out as the Hideous Zippleback croaked, its double-heads looming over the beach below. Stoick glared.

"Everyone, get clear! Make room!" he yelled. "It's our dragon!"

Everyone immediately scurried and scuttled towards the cliffs, clearing the sand as fast as they could, hope for returning home rising. There was confusion as the dragon weakly flew, slamming into the sand exhaustedly. Barf and Belch whined, dragging themselves towards Stoick. Stoick's gut twisted horrifically as one of the heads collapsed to the ground, revealing Tuffnut clinging to the back.

Stoick ran over, throwing his weapon out of his hand to catch the young man as he slumped out of the saddle. "I need help!" he cried.

Juniper was already there, Tuffnut whimpering as they pressed their hands to his bloody chest. Villagers began to gather around them, many holding back fearful tears. This was not good, this did not bode well, this was a bad omen and Stoick felt it. He felt it in his gut and his chest as they dragged Tuffnut away from his dragon. He looked to the Zippleback, who looked up at him with a defeated look in their eyes, and Stoick turned away. He already knew that the gods were not in their favour tonight.

* * *

><p>Astrid coughed and choked on the smoke that billowed through the Great Hall, the flames licking her body and leaving behind no pain on her skin. Whether she should have thanked the dragon suit or her dragon skin, she was not sure, but she squinted through the smoke, desperate to stop Alvin before he made it to the tunnel. Blind, bloody, and aching, she turned this way and that around the growing flames. Alvin had only entered moments beforehand, he couldn't be that far ahead.<p>

They retreat with the sunrise, Stormfly whispered in her mind, weak and exhausted. The ships flee. Safe?

Astrid felt a small bubble of hope brew in her stomach, the idea of the Berserkers retreating the sweetest she had thought since burned back into being the night before.

Alvin was still in the Hall, Astrid thought quickly. She felt her way along the hot wall, lit by the angry Nadder flames all around her. She was close to where the entrance of the tunnel was, seeing fragments of the banner and carved door with runes boding safety and protection embedded in the wood. She squinted in the smoke that burned her eyes when she realized the entrance had been caved in. It was sealed and safe from all the chaos. That meant Snowdrop was safe. Alvin wouldn't get to her, or anyone.

But as soon as she thought it, Alvin came up behind her with a grin on his mouth and hatred in his heart, a rock in his hand. She barely felt it crack against her head, but by the time the world went black, it was too late.

* * *

><p>"Leave me alone!" Hiccup exclaimed loudly, limping away from Rose who ran after him. His leg hurt, his head pounded, his heart raced.<p>

"Stop!" she begged, stepping in front of him frantically. "I'm not letting you go back, not until they're gone!"

"My friends are out there!" he yelled, thrusting a hand toward the smoke that filled the sky. "My family!"

Rose twisted her face in conflict, cursing under her breath. "I know, I know," she admitted. "You're tired, you're scared, I get it, I really do! But you can't go back, not with how dangerous it is. The

dragons need you, our mother needs you, and we need you alive!"

Hiccup pushed past her again, closing the distance between himself and Toothless. He grabbed the Night Fury's saddle, ready to hoist himself up, when Rose grabbed onto his shoulders and hoisted him down. Toothless groaned nervously and jumped into the low branches of the tree out of Hiccup's reach. Hiccup felt himself fall back, his body reflexively compensating, his arm swinging back and catching Rose's face. She fell back, barely keeping herself upright, her hand on her face.

He felt regret seep under his ribs and awkwardly shifted, watching her hold her face, trying to stay quiet. "Oh godsâ€œ I'm sorry," he said quickly, unsure of whether to approach her.

She pulled her hand away, blood in her palm from her nose. She put it back against it, the bleeding not slowing. "I'll be fine," she said quietly.

"But it's still bleeding," he replied.

Rose didn't look at him, her cheeks paling. Her mind was elsewhere, her eyes vacant. Then, she looked back up at Hiccup with wide eyes, blood smeared from her mouth over her lips. Hiccup gulped. "Why are you looking at me like that?"

Rose blinked. "Stormflyâ€œ just told me that the ships are retreating," she lied. "We can return safely shortly."

"You don't look relieved," Hiccup said with a tremble in his voice. "What else did she say?"

Rose looked down and wiped her nose clean with her sleeve. "Nothing."

"Did she at least tell you if Astrid is okay? Were they grounded?"

"She didn't say," she said quickly, deflecting. "Alvin thinks you're dead. He thinks Astrid's funeral was actually yours, so he has no reason to stay any longer than he has to. So he's leaving."

Hiccup grabbed onto her desperately. "Ask her if everyone is okay, how is the village? Is anyone hurt?"

It was Rose's turn to push Hiccup away. "I can't hear her anymore!" she said harshly. "It's not something I can control with new dragons!"

Hiccup backed off. "I want to go back. Now."

"Soon," Rose bargained. "Soon, the ships will be long gone and then you can return. We can't let any of them know that you're still alive. It will undo everything my â€œ I mean, our â€œ mum and I worked for."

Hiccup pursed his lips and stared at her for a tense moment.

"I won't wait long," he said.

"You won't have to," Rose added. Hiccup shook his head and turned away, sitting at the base of the tree, placing his head in his hands. She subtly looked up to Toothless, who looked heartbroken and tortured.

You lie, he murmured to her.

He'll get himself killed, she replied.

That has never stopped him before, the Night Fury said.

_He can be a hero when he's ready. Just not tonight. _Rose took a shaky breath and watched Hiccup for a moment before looking away.

Meanwhile, the last of the Outcasts boarded the ship quickly. Alvin crossed the docks, the last to climb onto a ship, Astrid's unconscious body hoisted over his shoulder like a sack of potatoes. "I've got a good one for us!" he bellowed, making the other Outcasts cheer. He dropped her body unceremoniously onto the deck of the ship, stepping over her to Dagur, who held the back of his head angrily.

"Did you get her good?" he fumed. Alvin shrugged.

"Not enough to kill her," he replied menacingly, "but yeah, I got her good." He looked back at the smouldering village of Berk and smirked, the smell of destruction tickling his nose deliciously as they left the smoke behind.

22. The Morning After

Hey guys! Thank you for being patient and waiting an extra week for this chapie. Thank you all who are still on this adventure with me.

* * *

><p>Chapter Twenty-Two: Aftermath

Smoke flittered into the air above smouldering piles of broken houses and broken bodies as the sun's rays splashed over the ground from behind Berk's peak. No one moved, no sound broke the silence of crackling embers and creaking timbers. Hiccup slowly walked down what used to be the main path, his lips parted in horror and his arms shaking. Blood was on the ground sticking to his boot, making his prosthetic slip on the stones, numbing his nose with the smell of iron. The other villagers slowly returned to the main village, some carried by Barf and Belch and Thornado while Meatlug and Fishlegs painstakingly cleared the sealed entrance of the tunnels to let the rest emerge.

Most villagers looked and cried out in misery, others sat on the ground with their heads in their hands. The dead were an equal combination of enemies and allies. Some faces were familiar and others were strange. Hiccup didn't linger on any of them, moving on as soon as he knew it wasn't Astrid. He couldn't care about anyone else. He couldn't bear the thought of finding her like he did the

week before.

He hadn't slept since Astrid's funeral, and he couldn't find her anywhere. Toothless stepped carefully behind him, staying quiet. Matrons tied their skirts around their knees to keep them off the ground as they pulled injured people from under fallen debris. Most were not as lucky as those few survivors. Burns, gashes, breaks, bruises, everything hit Hiccup's eyes light a flame too close to his face.

He heard a sound from a distance and looked up. Snotlout and his father Spitelout were in a scuffle, Snotlout shoving away from Spitelout to get to a body. Snotlout ran to the figure on the ground and froze. He fell to his knees, grabbing the body as Spitelout looked away painfully. Swamplout ran over to them, looking up at his grandfather before Spitelout scooped him up and began climbing back up the hill with him as Snotlout screamed in grief. He was holding Wormha in his arms, his wife and mother to his child, and Hiccup tore his gaze away.

Toothless bumped his back with his snout, pleading for some sort of comfort. Hiccup rubbed his head and trembled. He heard a chortle ahead and his head snapped up. He knew that sound. He broke from Toothless, racing forward, jumping over and ducking under rubble to get to the Nadder. She was huddled against a house that barely stood, her wing mangled and her breaths heavily. Hiccup skidded to a halt and grabbed her head gently with his hands, urging the dragon to open her eyes. He looked over the crown of spikes and noticed the saddle was burnt to bits.

"Stormfly?" he asked worriedly. "Gods, your wingâ€|"

He crawled over to it and hovered his palms over it, not wanting to touch the raw flesh. But the damage was clear as day. The webbing of the wings was gone, leaving behind nothing but the wing's skeleton. She was a downed dragon, and he saw no way he could fix it. He sat back and put his head in his hands.

He felt lost. He couldn't find Astrid, his friends were injured, his village was broken. He had a sister he never knew about and his mother was trapped somewhere and had been for years. He had a chance to stop them, if only he tried harder.

"Hiccup?" a voice asked gently. He didn't look up from his knees, nausea building inside him.

"She's gone, Fishlegs," Hiccup murmured. "They took her."

"And Ruffnut, too," Fishlegs added sadly. "Tuffnut's down, Stormfly's down, Snotlout's mum is goneâ€|" Fishlegs sucked in a breath. "A lot of people."

Hiccup stood weakly, nodding at his friend. "We'll get them back," Hiccup promised. "Dad and I will figure something out."

Fishlegs paled and his massive body shifted back slightly. He looked up to the Great Hall and back to Hiccup, his huge cheeks turning red.

"What's wrong?" Hiccup asked suspiciously.

"Umâ€|" Fishlegs swayed and wrinkled his face, the soot and grime from the battle still caked on his face. "In the tunnel, with the villagers, a Whispering Death attacked the survivors. Stoick fought it off, butâ€|"

Hiccup stepped closer. "But?"

"He was bitten."

At first, the information didn't make much sense. Dragon bites back in the day were common. But Whispering Deaths were not common in the old days. Hiccup rubbed his mouth, dreading the circumstances.

The two dragon riders hiked up the destroyed pathway to the Hall, silently stepping over the carnage. When they made it to the Hall, the injured were lying on the floor in rows waiting to be helped. He recognized Tuffnut lying on the floor, groaning as his dragon curled around him protectively. His torso was bandaged and he was well under the influence of the sleep drug to keep the pain at bay. Hiccup remembered the drug as if he could taste the bitterness on his gums, the powder used to keep him asleep as the Skrill wound healed. He couldn't imagine how much of the sleeping draught the villagers would need now.

Fishlegs motioned to the conference room at the back of the Hall, his eyes avoiding his friends. Hiccup entered hesitantly, seeing a group of people crowding around a makeshift bed atop the conference table the alliance had met at the day before. He felt his eyes droop. He hadn't slept in days. Not with how insane it had been.

On top of the table, face passive, was his father and chief, surrounded by people including Juniper, Gobber, Gothi, and Rose. Why Rose was there, he didn't know nor care. He couldn't look at her. Not with Astrid gone. Stoick waved Juniper away groggily, his bandaged arm limp on his lap, his skin cold and clammy. He reached out to his son, and Hiccup looked around the room like a lost Dragonling.

"Dad?" he asked quietly, approaching the edge of Stoick's bed. Stoick sighed and looked over. Hiccup noticed he had the Book of Dragons in his lap opened to the Whispering Death entry. Then, behind Stoick, was Gobber holding a small chest in one of his hands. On it was the inscription of the chiefdom oath of Berk.

"My boy," Stoick said tiredly, breaking Hiccup's gaze from the chest. He had a hand held out to him. That never happened. Hiccup, unsure of what to do, placed his lean, long hand in his father's fat fist and leaned in. "There has been anâ€| interesting turn of eventsâ€|"

"Whether you mean the fight or your healthâ€|" Hiccup trailed off. Even his awkward joking protective barrier was weak. He stayed quiet as his eyes began to burn and his heart began to ache.

"Just a bite," Stoick said, "but a nasty one at that."

"Whispering Death venom," Fishlegs respectfully added. Hiccup looked up quickly, alarmed. But Fishlegs raised his hands even faster. "We have some antivenom, we gave it to him already."

Hiccup furrowed his brow. "So what's going on, then? Is he going to be okay?"

A tired grin tugged at Stoick's mouth. "I thought you practically wrote this book."

Hiccup looked down. "It was a joint effort, I don't write those parts. Riding, anatomy, not venom."

Juniper rested a hand on Hiccup's shoulder. He didn't like the feeling of her comfort trying to force its way into his spirit. He shifted uncomfortably. "The antivenom is a painful process," she explained. "It has to race against the necrotic factors of the poison before it's too late. We couldn't wait so we gave it to him."

"Why would that be a bad thing?" he asked. "If my dad is sick, then fix him, I wouldn't care."

Gobber rubbed his eyes. "Everyone is trying to beat around the bush," he groaned. "The antivenom will put him through too much pain and â€"

"He's Stoick," Hiccup pressed.

"Son," Stoick said quietly. Hiccup looked over. "Listen to me."

Hiccup swallowed. Stoick placed a hand over Hiccup's, enclosing his hands with his. "They're going to force me into a slumber, to give me my best chance."

The room froze. Hiccup's exhaustion made the walls move around him, but they stood still at the same time. The sounds disappeared and reappeared as if they were parts of a dream, disappearing when he thought of them. He looked around the room again and saw the tired and saddened faces of those closest to his family.

"You've taken down the biggest dragon and trained the fastest," his father said hoarsely. "I've been at your beside as a baby with the cough, when you lost your leg, when you saved Snowdropâ€!"

He squeezed Hiccup's hands and Hiccup closed his eyes, a sob tearing through him. Stoick's voice shook.

"I don't want you to watch me go through that," his father finished. His voice cracked. "And I'm not ready to leave you yet. I won't do that to you, son."

Hiccup felt his face fall against his father's hand.

"I've already decided," Stoick said, taking in a breath. "Rose told me about Astrid. I know it's hard, and it hurts and you hate the world and everyone in it. Butâ€! Berk needs you. I need you."

Gobber stepped forward with the chiefdom chest. He opened it and retrieved a book, which he opened and showed to Stoick regretfully. Stoick, with Hiccup's head on his hands, felt the pull of slumber at his eyes. He read the oath.

"I, Stoick the Vast, seventh chief of my blood â€" "

Hiccup snapped his head up. "No, dad, wait!"

" â€" hearby pass on my title as chief and protector of Berk
â€" "

"Please!" Hiccup begged, his body convulsing, breaking. "I can't!"

" â€" to my son and heir, Hiccupâ€| Horrendous Haddock
IIIâ€| "

Stoick's eyes began to droop. Hiccup bit one of his knuckles. He wanted to let go, to run away, but he couldn't bring himself to.

" â€" until such a timeâ€| when I am back to healthâ€| or pass to Valhallaâ€| in front of the witnesses of the villageâ€| "

Gobber pulled the book away and looked to Hiccup. "Do you swear to protect Berk and her people, and swear your faithfulness to her land, respecting the past seven generations of your forefathers?"

Hiccup's eyes were fixed on his father, who stared at him, urging him to accept. He was fading into the dreamland quickly, and Hiccup's world was changing too fast for him to keep up. It was too rash, too instant. Hiccup bore down a sob and tried to shake his head, tried to reject it. But he had no choice.

"I doâ€|" Hiccup choked. Stoick's hands relaxed around his.

"That'sâ€| my boyâ€|" he whispered. Hiccup watched him relax and let go. His body went limp and his forced sleep took over. There was a silent lull as the news sunk in, seeping over him like Sun Sap all over again. His dad was dying. It was so stupid, the fact that something so little had the hugest consequences. Juniper still had her hand on Hiccup's shoulder and she gave it a tiny squeeze.

"We're doing the best we can," she said gently. Hiccup didn't say anything. "You should try to get some sleep," she suggested. "The past few days have left little room for it."

Gobber scoffed. "Leave the boy alone. The last thing he needs is an understatement."

He was the first to leave, stepping past Rose and lumbering out the door, muttering to himself and taking shaky breaths. Juniper bit her lip sadly and left Hiccup as well. Rose was about to follow when Gothi stepped up behind her. The wise woman looked up at her and smiled a gentle, grieving smile that showed all her wrinkles. Rose smiled tightly but Gothi looked at her, then Stoick, and back to her. She sighed silently and reached up to Rose's face, patting her cheek gently. Rose blinked as Gothi left to the rest of the Hall. Rose watched after her, knowing Gothi knew, when Hiccup turned to her.

"You told him Astrid was gone," he said hoarsely. Rose licked her lips and nodded lightly. "How did you know?"

Rose's green eyes flicked upwards back to Hiccup, who was glaring at

her with bloodshot eyes. "I'm sorry?"

"You've been here the whole time, how could you possibly know?"

Rose shifted uncomfortably as Hiccup stood. "Iâ€œ I heardâ€œ!"

Hiccup leapt out of his seat, tearing away from Stoick. He glowered at Rose, shaking, fuming, wind whistling out of flared nostrils. Rose paled. Hiccup snapped his hands forward, grabbing Rose by the collar and slamming her against the wall. The air flew out of her as Hiccup shook her again and again. A choked cry escaped her lips, her body rattled.

"STOP LYING TO ME!" Hiccup screamed. His vision went red, his knuckles numbing at the tension. Rose's shirt began to tear. She whimpered, her lip quivering. "STOP!"

"Hiccup!" she cried.

Hiccup slammed her against the wall again. She gasped, her head lolling slightly, her breaths ragged. She pushed against him as he shook her ferociously. "I should have never trusted you!" he screamed. "I should have gone after them, I should have stopped them!"

Rose grunted as she was slammed again into the stone. A drop of blood dripped from her nostril, dripping onto Hiccup's fists. It streamed over her lips, coating her gritted teeth.

"Hiccup!" Gobber cried. Hiccup body was ripped away from Rose, a huge arm scooping Hiccup away. Gobber forced him back, stepping in between him and Rose, who cowered and wiped her nose with the back of her hand, her body shaking and her breathing whistling by. Hiccup stepped back, his vision returning to normal, his face contorted in hate.

"I will never forget this," he spat. "I will never â€œ never â€œ forgive you!"

"This is not her fault!" Gobber yelled.

Hiccup shook his head, pulling on his hair in agony, growling and on the verge of falling apart. He heard Toothless run into the Hall as people protested. The Night Fury rushed into the doorframe, his eyes thinned to slits, his teeth barred. He ran to Hiccup, slithering around him. Hiccup clutched for the reins.

"Get me out of here," Hiccup begged as he pulled himself into the saddle. Toothless barked, running out of the room and flying out of the Hall. Gobber ran after them until he realized they left, and turned to Rose, who kept her eyes down as she stanched the bleeding with her sleeve. He pursed his lips and motioned to the door.

"Odin help me," he muttered. The villagers were murmuring at the scene of Hiccup and looked to Gobber, who smoothed his moustache and hobbled into the fray, shaking his head. He climbed the stairs of the platform slowly, his legs killing him from the battle, and he turned sorely to face the survivors.

He didn't know what to say at first, but he knew he had to say something. Families were broken, hearts were aching, rage was

babbling, and he was on the edge, facing the awaiting refugees. He took a shallow breath, the best he could do.

"Our chiefâ€| Stoick the Vast of House Haddockâ€| has relinquished his right to Berk."

The Hall stayed silent for a moment. Some people stared, lost and stunned. Others gasped. Some cursed and looked away. Then, the room erupted with protest.

"No! It's not possible!"

"You're lying!"

"What if Alvin comes back?!"

Gobber raised his hands, waving them strongly, trying to quiet the crowd that pressed against the edge of the platform.

"Hey!" he yelled, trying to quiet the crowd. "Listen to me!"

The crowd hushed slightly, the room buzzing.

"Stoick is not well," Gobber said firmly. "The matrons have forced him into a sleep to give our former leader a chance to survive; I think we can all agree that we'd rather not kill him outright."

The crowd mumbled to each other, some hysterical, others tense.

"He has passed the alliance to his first-born and only heir, Hiccup."

"As if that will help!" someone yelled from the back of the Hall. Some people, most from the other clans in the alliance, nodded in agreement, barking at Gobber.

"Shut it!" Gobber bellowed, out of the ordinary for him. The Hall went silent, some people grumbling. "Hiccup was the one who changed the face of the alliance. He stopped a war between Vikings and dragons and I can't think of a better person who can take on Alvin. If he can take out a Red Death, he can take out an Outcast... I'm sure of it."

23. The Outcasts

Happy Friday, everybody! I hope you've had a great week. There is fanart up at if you wanna take a peak (some Hiccup and Astrid, some Astrid and Snowdrop) and some I have yet to post. Tell me your favourite part and I will see if I can draw it! Unfortunately, the boyfriend lost my sketchbook at a Walmart so I've had to restart most, but there are some I managed to redo. See you next Friday!

* * *

><p>Chapter Twenty-Four: The Outcasts

Astrid stirred long after the ships had docked, the back of her head pulsing painfully. Her cheek was cold against a hard slab of stone, and the walls echoed with sounds of droplets of water smacking the

ground. Her body was sore, but not as sore as it should have been. She felt complete, yet unrested, and weakly pushed her body off the ground, bringing her knees under herself. She touched the back of her head, remembering the sound the rock made when Alvin cracked it over her skull, and found nothing there. She looked around herself slowly.

She was in a cell. At least, that what she thought it was at first glance. Stone walls met a stone ceiling, which hung over a stone floor. The door was a small hole in one of the walls, low to the ground, with a grate bolted around it. But water dripped down the walls onto the floor loudly, and dead vines clung to the stone dryly, crumbling to dust at Astrid's touch. It was a small pocket-cave within a cave, like a room within a house, and it had a small hole up high for sunlight to leak in. And she was trapped inside. She sat on the ground heavily, looking around her, the only light coming from the tiny door. She crawled towards it, dry-mouthed and hungry. She peered through it carefully. She didn't see anything but more stone, possibly to another room or a hallway, but there was no easy way to tell for sure.

"Don't get too close," a voice grunted. Astrid jumped and gasped, spinning around and wrenching a stiff muscle in her leg. Ruffnut was sitting in a dark nook of the cell, holding her arm with a pale hand, bags of blue under her eyes and her hair out of sorts. Her helmet was missing and bits of her armour were gone, her clothes underneath covered in what was dry and brown. She sported a huge bruise on her left cheek, red and purple and swollen. "They'll kick you if your face is too close to their boot."

Astrid crawled over to her, her hands slapping over frigid rock wet with musty water. Ruffnut's lips quivered as Astrid put a hand to her face, touching the uninjured cheek. "You're alright," she sighed gratefully.

"No, I'm not," Ruffnut scoffed. She moved her hand away from her arm to reveal a raw and ferocious gash — the one made by the hook that had captured her — and it continued to bleed slowly. Astrid wrinkled her nose. She looked down at herself, noticing the bandaged tied around her shoulder from Gobber.

"Here."

She untied it with stiff fingers and pulled it from herself. Ruffnut didn't say anything as Astrid wrapped the already-blood-covered fabric around her arm to stanch the bleeding. She only hissed as more pressure was tied around it. Astrid sat back and looked at her own shoulder, peeking through the hole in her shirt. The skin was clean and uninjured. At least she had that benefit. She looked around again, lips pursed.

"How long have we been here?" Astrid asked quietly.

"I lost count after three days," the twin replied. "You can't count by the sun because it gets too dark when it rains, and they don't feed you often enough to count the plates."

Astrid wrapped her arms around herself. She rested her forehead on her elbows and swallowed with difficulty. More than three days since Berk, where the village had been burned. She thought of Snowdrop

waiting for her again, Hiccup realizing she was gone again, Stormfly's wing burnt and broken. And with her mind thinking of horrible things, it trailed off to her belly, where the baby should have been if nothing had happened. She never felt so empty. She couldn't even cry. She sat in silence with her eyes burning and her chest throbbing and her stomach flipping.

Ruffnut and Astrid sat in silence as they thought about their situations over and over before noise echoed up the hall. The two women straightened themselves upright as voices bellowed and gates opened, the squeal of metal on stone hurting their ears.

"Get up!" a man bellowed to the cell down the hall. Astrid and Ruffnut helped each other to their feet as their gate was unlocked and opened. "Out!" a burly man barked at them. He had to lean over to be seen through the tiny door. The tribal tattoos and the leanness of his legs showed he was a Berserker. Astrid didn't move and Ruffnut avoided eye contact. The man glared. "Are you deaf?"

Ruffnut shuddered. "Just go."

Astrid looked back and reluctantly stepped to the door, remembering she didn't have any weapons to protect herself with. They had been very careful in stripping the two of them of any sharp and hard objects. All Astrid had left was her riding suit stripped bare. Her pauldrons, her armoured skirt, everything else was gone. She swallowed and licked her bottom lip, feeling the poke of the Night Fury scale against her breast, tied under the safety of her suit. Ruffnut went first ahead of Astrid, crouching down and crawling out, struggling to get back to her feet once she made it into the hall. The Berserker made no move to help her out, and Astrid followed.

The moment she made it out of the cell, the soldier grabbed her and shoved her into the wall across of him. She hit the wall with her shoulder and grunted, and the man spat at her feet.

"Don't waste my time," the man growled. "Or you'll be out of it."

Astrid grimaced and held her shoulder, refusing to look at him before she joined the line of hostages forming in the hall. Each of them stood still as their ankles were cuffed and attached to a single line of heavy chain to keep them together. Anyone who stepped out of line would be seen as dozen of soldiers watched while they shuffled forward. Astrid wrinkled her nose and kept her head down. She focused on Ruffnut's back as they filed down the hall, noticing her surroundings.

The hall was wide and naturally made. The stone was smooth and worn, the walls high. The cells were all nestled in the hall, where the smell was foul and the cries of other prisoners were muffled and hushed. They walked on, poked and prodded to stay in pace, until the hall funneled into a massive cavern.

The cavern was one of the largest Astrid had been inside. Hundreds of dragons were trudging about, dragging wagons or carrying too many people through crowds of soldiers. The soldiers stayed in platoons, eyeing the new bunch of prisoners with sneers or grins as they made their way towards the back of the cavern. Some eyed them with a certain amount of fear. Astrid only flicked her eyes in a certain

direction once, and she saw the face of someone she thought she recognized. It wasn't a recognition that came with a name, but it certainly came with a face, as if she had walked by them down a Berk path at some point or another. And she thought, if people from Berk " as Rose had said " were here, what stopped them from using them as soldiers against their own village? It wouldn't be beyond the Outcasts to do that. She found herself wondering if any Berk soldiers had killed their own long lost family members. She pushed that thought aside.

The line began to slow at the back of the cavern, where they walked down another hallway and far from the deafening rumble in the main cavern. The sheer size of this place, Astrid thought, was too much for them to make. It would have had to have been scavenged, and they were still installing torches and doors to the other caverns as they walked by. They were settling, preparing, she noted.

The line stopped at the mouth of the second hallway, where the line squeezed into a large round room. On one side of the room, Astrid and the other prisoners lined next to each other by the order of an angry and tired soldier. On the other side were the faces of their captors, and the sight of them made her skin crawl.

Alvin sat in a great wooden chair, slouching in it as if he was bored, poking at a hot meal and slurping at a horn of ale while Dagur picked at his teeth with his nail. Next to them was another handful of people Astrid didn't recognize. A woman with a stern face, eyes stormy and jaw clenched, stood away from the table with a hand on a shortsword at her hip and a plate of armour covering her breast. Then, a broad beast of a man stood close to Dagur, watching the hostages with a very suspicious eye.

Alvin perked up at the sight of Astrid and raised his hands.

"Ah! I've been waiting for this moment for a while now!" he mused. "Behold, my most prized collection. Dragon riders of Berk " along with some bakers and whatever " and some of the feistiest soldiers we've fought in a long time!"

He grinned even harder and stood, scanning the line thoroughly. "Oh aye!" have we got some jobs for you."

Astrid looked down again. She didn't dare shift.

"So. Business," Alvin stated simply. "You folks are here to make a deal with me. You see, Outcast Island was too small a rock for us, and a little too " how would you say " oh, I don't know, the long and short of it is we lit it on fire and left it behind for a new home. A place where we wouldn't be Outcasts, a place of discipline and standard, a place where the power is brought back to our people."

Dagur rolled his eyes and slumped back, bored out of his mind.

"This little " alliance of yours failed in protecting you, and what I'm offering is protection in return for service. We have hundreds of people to feed, so we need people to hunt. We have dragons to raise for our soldiers, and people " Alvin eyed Astrid, grazing her body with her eyes gently " to raise them. I just don't have the time for that. We need boats, armies for protection, food, and we need

people to do that for us."

Alvin nodded to himself and looked to the woman. "Birdsong here is who runs this place. She will sort you to your duties."

Alvin sat back down with a huff, returning to his food. The prisoners all eyed it enviously as Birdsong paced in front of them. She looked at each of them for a few moments before moving onto the next. She peered over Astrid with stoic curiosity, nodding to herself once before looking over Ruffnut. Her eyes lingered on the bandage around her arm.

"Alright," she murmured quietly. She stepped back and addressed the group. "There are many jobs to be done in this hellhole, and they need to be done right. Do them, and I feed you. Fail, and you die. It's a simple life here, keep that in mind."

Astrid bit the inside of her cheek, her aggression rising. Birdsong rolled her shoulders and counted on her fingers. "One, we need hunters for food. Two, soldiers for warfare. Three, labourers for our home. The jobs are much more specific, but you get the point. So who are the dragon riders among you?"

There was a haunting silence from the other side of the room, the clink of the chain the only thing heard. No one wanted to step forward or reveal Astrid and Ruffnut, who stayed still and quiet. Birdsong glared and walked down the line again. Alvin sighed and Dagur rolled his eyes again. "The two blonde ones in the middle," Alvin growled, annoyed. Birdsong's eyes flicked over like an owl, locking onto Astrid and Ruffnut as if they were prey. She went to Astrid and grabbed her chin. Astrid hissed slightly as her face was wrenched into the torchlight, meeting Birdsong's eyes with a hateful stare. Birdsong's mouth twitched.

"Nice suit," Birdsong noted. "Dragon skin. Something I wouldn't expect from a Berkian."

"I didn't harvest it, if that's what you're implying," Astrid spat. Birdsong scoffed as the other prisoners shifted nervously.

"Did you make it?" Birdsong inquired.

"No," Astrid replied simply.

"Then who did?" she retorted sharply.

Astrid sneered, remembering how Alvin thought Hiccup was the one who took the Outcast Orchid instead of her. "Doesn't matter, you fucking poisoned him."

Birdsong pulled her hand away and slapped Astrid across the face. She gasped and stumbled, and Birdsong looked at her with a wrinkled nose. "You watch that mouth of yours, girl, or it'll be the Pit for you."

Astrid put a hand to her cheek gently and sucked in a breath. Birdsong looked to the rest. "Take this girl here as an example! For anyone who talks back, fights back, or insubordinates in anyway, you'll be thrown down to the Pit. I don't think I need to exaggerate when I say that no one comes back once they're sent."

Alvin and Dagur laughed at each other as Astrid's face burned. Dagur murmured something about the Pit with a smile on his mouth and his eyes thinking of seemingly pleasant thoughts. It made Astrid squirm to think that something like the Pit would bring him so much joy. Birdsong wiped her hand on her pants and snickered. "Howeverâ€| I know when to be wise in the face of immaturity. Hatchery for this one," Birdsong stated. "Need someone around here who knows dragons with how hard we've been working them. Don't make me regret it."

Alvin grunted. "This girl can fight," he interjected.

"Then it's good that she was stripped of her weapons, hmm?" Birdsong replied. Alvin nodded in agreement, muttering to Dagur who also nodded. Astrid hung her head sheepishly as Birdsong moved on, separating everyone to different areas. Many were sent to labour while others were soldiers. No one else was noted for the hatchery she noticed, and Ruffnut was left until last. Astrid looked over as Birdsong chewed her mouth in thought.

"Another dragon riderâ€| What kind?" she asked.

"Zippleback," Ruffnut sniffed. Birdsong raised her eyebrows.

"A mischievous beast," Birdsong muttered. "Two heads. How?"

Ruffnut gulped. "My brother took the other half."

"And your brotherâ€|?"

Ruffnut didn't respond. Astrid felt cold as Ruffnut swallowed again, a bead of sweat trickling down her temple. Birdsong put a hand on her shoulder, at first to comfort, but then to inspect the wet bandage. "You're hurt," she noticed. "Probably infected by the look of it."

Alvin straightened his back. "We're not wasting any more medical supplies on rats, Birdsong."

Birdsong looked back to him. "She's a dragon rider," she argued. "Not a terribly disposable person."

"Don't care," Alvin barked. "Save it for my troops. Some of them took a beating and I don't want an Outcast to die in place of a Berkian."

Birdsong turned slowly, staring Alvin down. "Then what do you suggest we do with her?"

Dagur cleared his throat. "I'd be open to an arrangement."

Ruffnut stiffened and the chain around her ankles scraped along the floor horrendously. Astrid jumped and grabbed onto her, partly to steady her and partly to protect her. Birdsong looked back at them and gave them a look.

"I need a shieldmaiden," he continued. "And if she can find the herbs herself for her arm, she can have them."

"No," Ruffnut spat. "No way."

Dagur smiled and Alvin shrugged again. Birdsong pursed her lips painfully and opened them to speak. Alvin raised his hand to her. "Done. If you can find a use, then do it. I don't care."

Dagur chuckled and gestured to the man next to him, who stepped over to Ruffnut. She scrambled back, Astrid crying out as the man grabbed the chain around her feet, pulling it from under her. She fell to the ground and the man hoisted her up. He unclamped the chain from her ankles and pulled her free. Other soldiers grabbed onto other prisoners, dragging them into various hallways. Birdsong grabbed onto Astrid and tore her from Ruffnut.

"No!" Astrid shrieked, kicking up and wriggling in Birdsong's arms. Ruffnut tried to twist out of the bodyguard's grip, looking back to Astrid with wide, red eyes. "Ruffnut!"

"Astrid!" she screamed back. Birdsong hauled Astrid out of the room with surprising strength, dragging her down the hallway and away from Ruffnut.

"Let me go, you bitch!" Astrid screamed. Birdsong clamped a hand over her mouth. The hallway they walked down became darker and darker, and Astrid became weaker and weaker, sobbing and growling as Birdsong pulled her deeper into the caverns. She opened another cell, this one devoid of any light with a thick wooden door, and shoved Astrid inside. Astrid stumbled to her knees. Birdsong entered the cell with her and slammed the door shut. Astrid turned to her and scurried back. Birdsong drew her sword and pointed it at her. Astrid glared.

"The suit," Birdsong muttered. "Take it off."

"Fuck you," Astrid spat. "And Alvin, and Dagur, and all you murderers!"

Birdsong rumbled in her chest and closed the distance between them faster than a falcon, pushing Astrid against the wall and gnashing her teeth in her face.

"Shut. Up," she whispered. Astrid stared at her with defiance. Birdsong was so close to her face now, her grip like iron. "Forget about your friend. Forget about Berk. Forget about your dragon. It won't help you. This place will eat you whole if you aren't careful. Choose your enemies wisely, or you'll join your friend. And I'm sure you would rather work beside a man than under him, so take this as a warning. Either take the suit off and give it to me or I'll get someone else to do it for you."

She stepped away and Astrid huddled by the wall, unmoving at first as tears spilled over her face. She almost didn't do it, almost spat in her face, but the cold in her belly made her break. She shakily unbuckled her belt and threw it at Birdsong's boots, the buckles scraping across the floor loudly. Then, the buckles that closed over her chest were pulled open one by one, revealing a stained shirt underneath. Her vest, her slacks, and her boots were soon at Birdsong's feet, Astrid wearing nothing but her shirt and a pair of loose shorts. She shivered in the dark as Birdsong collected the pieces. Astrid remembered the time Hiccup had spent building it and

sewing it to fit her, hilariously forgetting to leave room for her breasts the first time. And now Birdsong had it in her fist, a smirk on her face.

Birdsong left the cell, shutting the door and locking it. Astrid felt her blood burn.

Ruffnut was gone. It had been days, she had no way of telling, since she had seen Hiccup. She ran to the door and she pushed against it, then pulled. It was locked too tight to move. She screamed, slamming into the door over and over as the hall grew too silent for sanity.

"You'll never win!" Astrid screamed. "They will come after us! They will make you pay!"

She slammed her fists into the door over and over, screaming and crying until her hands grew sore. She pressed her forehead to the door and slid down it, falling into a pile on the cold dark stone. She wrapped her arms around herself and found herself thinking about different ways to tear people apart, sobbing to herself, clutching at the Night Fury scale around her throat.

"I'm sorry," she cried to the scale in her fist. "I'm sorry I fought with you, I'm sorry I argued. I didn't know it would be the last time"â€"

She choked on the words and curled onto herself even tighter, as if she would disappear into the floor if she tried hard enough.

* * *

><p>Hours later â€" or maybe years â€" Astrid was surrounded by flowers. A meadow bright and fertile, smelling of life and flowers. She sat up in the field and looked around. She noticed dragons walking around as if dazed, curling up among the flowers and snoozing and rolling around. She felt a flutter in her chest at the sight of something so happy, so safe. She looked up and saw an endless sky, day turning into night and night turning into stars. She walked through the flowers, feeling the long grass as she combed through it with her fingers.<p>

She wouldn't remember this place when she woke up, but it didn't matter at the time. Her dragonblood warmed her endlessly as she walked onward in the field, walking towards something and nothing all at once, her dreamland offering her a moment of peace.

24. Warrior

Sorry for being tardy this week! Family member in ICU right now so it's been a little hard. Thank you to those who have taken the time to review - all of you put a smile on my face, along with those who have chosen to follow this adventure.

* * *

><p>Chapter Twenty-Four: Warrior

A week after Alvin left Berk in shambles and Stoick in a

life-suckling slumber, Hiccup sat at the top of Berk peak. He looked over the valley, Berk's blackened ground sticking out from the view like a sore wing. Toothless watched with him, his head rested on his arms and one of his wings fanned over Hiccup to protect him from the rain.

He fiddled with the Nadder scale with his fingertips and stared at the colours of blue and yellow, so bright under the grey sky above. Toothless sighed and nudged his knee with his snout. He looked over slightly. He rested a hand on his dragon's snout, feeling the bond between them as if it was a net catching him from an impossible fall.

She lives, Toothless said.

Hiccup didn't say anything. He put the scale back in his shirt and Toothless snuffed.

_The people need you, _Toothless continued.

Hiccup sighed. "Budâ€|"

He couldn't bring himself to say anything else. His dad was gone â€“ or at least, he was as gone as gone could be without dying altogether â€“ and the dead had been burned three days beforehand. They didn't have enough boats to do a proper funeral, so they used debris tied together that still floated on water, burning that instead. It was the best they could do. Fishlegs stayed with Stoick and Meatlug, trying his best to get debris off the island to start rebuilding. Tuffnut managed to push through the first week, narrowly escaping infection, but not his grief for his lost sister. Snotlout refused to talk to anyone after the death of his wife, spending all his time with Swamplout.

Hiccup wiped his nose with the back of his hand and took a shaky breath.

You're thinkingâ€| of the bodies.

Hiccup groaned and let his head hang, pulling on the back of his neck to relieve the tension. He couldn't help it; after hours of collecting bodies and piling them and scavenging them for metal and leather, the vacant faces and bloody mess keeping him from getting any sleep. And once they were well into the recovery and reclamation of their village, foul and disgusting recognition began to set in. Faces long thought lost were once again found upon bodies wearing ill-fitting Outcast armour, family members and old friends captured in raids. Everyone assumed they were dead. They weren't, not before the battle.

"They used them." Hiccup choked painfully on his words. "They just took themâ€| and used them."

They no longer suffer.

Hiccup looked up to Toothless with red eyes. "You say that to make me feel better, but it doesn't."

Toothless's irises flickered and the dragon turned his head to look over the valley, his mind quiet.

When the bodies were discovered, Rose had tried to explain to Hiccup, but Hiccup refused to be anywhere near her. She had betrayed him, let the enemy take his wife and she failed to mention that some of the soldiers were their own blood. "They were forced to," she had tried to say. Hiccup wanted to throw her off a cliff at that moment. Instead, he separated himself from everyone. He never wanted the role of chief, especially in this time.

The dragon riders were scattered. Two were gone, and the other four were lost. Their dragons tried to console them, begged them to ride them like before, but the wounds went too deep. It was a bleak and pathetic time, Hiccup realized. Stormfly hadn't heard from Astrid since she was taken, the distance too great for them, and she spent her time with Fishlegs and Gobber, who carefully stripped the dead flash off her wing to at least clean the barren tendrils of bone left behind.

Thinking about Astrid was almost harder than thinking about the bodies or Stoick or the destruction. He had to get her out of there. He had no idea where to go or where to look, the scent of the ships long gone with the storm wind. They spent each night searching for them under the cover of darkness to no avail. All they found were burnt down villages and abandoned homes. But he would never keep looking. He knew, he felt it in his soul, that she was alive.

He hated sitting and stood up. He brushed his legs clean and climbed onto Toothless' back, which was wet from the rain. He secured himself and the two of them flew down to the village, landing at the Great Hall's broken doors. He walked past the still-injured and stayed quiet as people begged him for help, hope, food, water, anything. He pretended he didn't hear them.

Cauli, nursing her arm, locked eyes with him and ran over to him.

"Where have you been?" she asked sharply under her breath. "We need to meet," she pressed.

"What do you want?" he asked with a sigh. Cauli frowned with disgust.

"We need a chief, Hiccup." The statement made Hiccup look away palely. "Our people are lost and don't know what to do."

"I don't know what to do!" Hiccup hissed. "I can't just walk around and fix people and bring them back from Alvin, I don't know what you expect from me!"

Cauli scoffed. "Perhaps some maturity on your part, some responsibility if it won't kill you."

Hiccup growled and tore away, storming away. Cauli bit her lip and grabbed his arm, turning him.

"Hiccup, please," she said. "I know you're hurting. But so is everyone else. We were lucky to escape with the four alliance leaders, even if we are all young and grieving."

Hiccup looked back at her. "I just need time," he whispered. Cauli

pursed her lips.

"You've had a week. I had a day. You need to figure this out or find someone who can do it for you. We need someone now."

Hiccup couldn't help but nod, and Cauli gave his arm a squeeze before she let go and walked away. He looked after her for a time before he continued onward, heading towards where his dad slept. He entered the room. Juniper was tending to him, and Snowdrop was curled in a ball under his arm. She looked up.

"Did Astrid come home?" she asked quickly.

"Not yet, Snow," Hiccup replied painfully. She pouted and curled back into her ball. Juniper sighed sadly and she looked up at Hiccup. She went to Stoick's arm and unwrapped it carefully, Hiccup watching her every move.

"We've been changing the bandages as much as possible," she began, "but the infection is powerful."

The skin around the bandage already was fiery red. She pulled the fabric away and showed him the bite mark, festering. He sucked in a breath and Snowdrop moved to see, but Juniper was already rewapping it.

"Toothless' saliva is helping, but it will take more than that to save him, I'm afraid. The anti-venom Fishlegs made is working as well as it can."

Stoick slept with ragged breaths, his face twitching. He groaned sometimes and shivered through his fever. Juniper put his swollen and freshly wrapped arm under the furs and tucked him in again. Hiccup grabbed a cloth nearby and dabbed the sweat away. Juniper watched and gathered her supplies, leaving the room gracefully. Snowdrop lifted her head again and lifted her arms after a moment. Hiccup looked up and set the rag down, grabbing Snowdrop and pulling her against him delicately, sitting on a nearby chair.

They didn't have to say anything to each other. The two of them had been through so much in the past month, it wasn't surprising that they sat together next to Stoick everyday.

"How's the leg?" Hiccup asked. Snowdrop looked down and lifted her foot, bandaged thickly and splinted.

"They said I get to keep it," Snowdrop sighed. Hiccup found himself glaring, amused.

"You sound disappointed."

"Well," Snowdrop huffed. "Yours is really cool."

"Losing it wouldn't be fun," Hiccup replied. "You're lucky you're still in one piece. If Astridâ€œ if Astrid were to come home and see you with a peg leg like me, she would tear my head off."

Snowdrop smiled and nodded. "Oh, just wait till she finds out about my toof!"

Hiccup smiled, a strange feeling, and he hugged Snowdrop tightly. Snowdrop hugged him back.

"So I was thinking," Snowdrop suggested, pushing Hiccup back a bit. "Now that you're chief and everything, can I protect Icky?"

"Icky?" Hiccup asked lightly.

"He saved me from that nasty dragon and now I have to stay with him till he wakes up," she argued. "Astrid always did after you saved me from the other nasty dragon. You know, to protect you while you slept and stuff."

Hiccup raised his eyebrows. "You're going to protect dad?"

"You'll be too busy being chief so I wanna do it for you."

She turned away and crawled back onto Stoick, sitting on his belly and resting her chin in her hands, watching him. Hiccup watched her for a moment, thinking of how tiny she was, and yet so huge. Her presence alone, that youthfulness and hope about her, was the most reassuring thing Hiccup had seen in what felt like years.

"Iâ€œ I don't know what to do," Hiccup admitted. Snowdrop looked over with her fair eyebrows raised.

"What do you mean, Hup?"

Hiccup sighed. He didn't know how to explain to a three-year-old. He trailed off and shook his head. Snowdrop wiggled her nose in thought.

"You're sad," she said. Hiccup scoffed and laughed lightly, sucking in a breath and wiping his dry lips with his fingers.

"Yeah, I'mâ€œ I'm sad."

"About Astrid?"

"A lot of things. Astrid, Stoick â€œ Icky, I mean â€œ and we lost a lot of people a few days ago."

Snowdrop nodded. "I know many mamas and papas were stolen. Or they went to sleep forever."

Hiccup nodded again. He sat back in his chair and watched as Snowdrop thought really hard.

"I'm sad too, Hup," she noted. "But you know what?"

"What?" Hiccup asked.

"Astrid always told me that staying sad did nuffing."

Hiccup raised an eyebrow as Snowdrop used her hands to explain.

"If I stay sad, then I can't fight. If I stay sad, then I'd forget to fix the problem. I broke a toy once when I was, like, two? And I cried and cried and forgot that I could just tie it back together. Astrid told me that if I stayed sad, then I would have forgotten to

fix it."

Hiccup thought about that for a moment. He shook his head at the thought. This was much, much more than a broken toy. But Snowdrop had been through the same he had been. Snowdrop waited for a response. When she didn't get one, she crawled closer to Hiccup and reached out for his hand. He sighed and gave it to her. She played with his fingers.

"You just have a lot of broken toys to fix," she added.

"It's a bit more complicated than that," Hiccup said. "I'm chief now, I don't know."

Snowdrop threw her other hand up and waved it around. "Shh!" she hissed. "No, no, no. That's not how you fix a problem, Hup."

Hiccup clamped his mouth shut and furrowed his brow. "So... I should just fix everything? Just like that?"

"Uh-huh," Snowdrop murmured simply.

"And how?" Hiccup asked.

"I dunno, I'm not you," Snowdrop shrugged. "It's up to you. You're just too sad to start figuring it out."

Hiccup blinked and balked at her. She tried to fit her hand in his, and the size difference made him wonder even more. Snowdrop was surprisingly wise for her age. Maybe it was her sister's care that did it. Maybe it was just her sister shining through her. Or maybe he lacked Astrid's kick in the ass when he needed it the most. He sat in thought for a moment.

"I have to plan a speech," he sighed.

"Speeches are boring," Snowdrop countered.

Hiccup chuckled. Everything he suggested, she shot down. It was adorable. It was fierce and noble and hopeful. He sucked on his lower lip and gave it a sharp bite. He watched her play with his fingers a little bit more before he closed his hand around hers, pulling her towards him. She opened her arms and gave him a hug around the neck and Hiccup wrapped his arms around her torso, giving her a squeeze.

"Will you come with me?" he asked. "I have to talk to the village. It would help me a lot if you came with me."

Snowdrop pulled away and her mouth split into a huge grin, revealing her missing tooth that fell out too early when she fell in the tunnels. "Okay!"

Hiccup scooped her up and planted her on his hip. He bounced her up to settle her and he lingered his gaze on his father. He sighed and gave Stoick a nod, as if saying he was ready, even though he didn't feel like it. He turned and walked out of the room, crossing the Hall. He scanned the room quickly and found Cauli among the crowd. He locked eyes with her and she paused. She had been talking to an elder, but she abandoned the conversation and looked to Barb, who sat

next to Netmug. They looked up to Hiccup and they shifted, tensing and watching like hawks. Hiccup's heart began to pound and his stomach grew cold. Snowdrop hugged his neck again as if to calm him.

Hiccup made his way to the platform. He stepped past the injured slowly, and they sat up painfully to watch him. Cauli watched and Barb helped Netmug to his feet. Hiccup put on foot on the first step, then the other on the second, ascending the steps one at a time. Soon, all eyes were on him as he centred himself on the platform. Someone ran out of the Hall, calling to the villagers outside that Hiccup had taken the stage. He repositioned Snowdrop again and found his mouth dry and his throat ragged. He took a deep breath.

"Iâ€œ| I guess I should start by apologizing," he said quietly. The villagers murmured to each other. "I shouldn't have left this for so long."

Cauli looked to the side slightly and looked at Hiccup again. Hiccup took another shaky breath.

"My dadâ€œ| was a great leader. He was brave and selfless. I mean, he still isâ€œ| butâ€œ| "

He choked and the Hall went silent. He sucked in another breath and clenched his teeth.

"It's not fair," he spat. He swallowed and struggled onward. "We have all lost so much, and hope seems to be a dream at this point. Butâ€œ| there is still hope among us," he said, looking to Snowdrop. He looked back to the villagers and felt his blood grow warm.

"Fourteen years ago, my mother was taken. We assumed she was dead because we couldn't find her. We assumed that because she was dead, it was easier to move on. Butâ€œ| why did we stop looking for her? Why did we ever give up?"

Hiccup scanned the crowd. "My dad searched for her for years. I guess he never stopped looking. There are some of us who look over the sea and wonder if our loved ones are doing the same, looking for usâ€œ| and maybe some of them still are."

Cauli glared and hushed someone next to her. Hiccup looked to Cauli and motioned to her. "We made an alliance with your father â€œ" He looked to Barb and Netmug, who both looked confused, yet perceptive. "â€œ" and your fathers as well as a tribute. It was a tribute to those we had lost, and how we had finally â€œ" seemingly â€œ" made it into a peace time that would span to eternity."

Hiccup smiled sadly. "â€œ| Peace can never be eternal. Not if anyone we know lives in the clutches of our enemies. Not after they used our people and forced swords into their hands to strike down their own."

Gobber, standing at the back of the crowd, chewed his lip and kept his eyes on Hiccup. Snowdrop put her head on Hiccup's shoulder. There was a tense moment of silence, a mournful calm that somehow made Hiccup more comfortable on the platform.

"They took our blood," he said strongly, fighting back tears. "They

spilled it and stole it and left as if we wouldn't follow. But they? They have no idea what or who we are!"

Someone yelled in agreement, then another and another.

"They may have armies, but so do we. They may have fire, but so do we. They may have our families, but we have our dragons, and if I can't get my hands on both, I will die trying!" he cried.

Villagers threw their fists into the air, cheering. Tears spilled onto Hiccup's cheek, his passion growing, Snowdrop grinning from ear to ear. "We will find our families, and we will avenge the fallen, and we will get our eternal peace, because after this, they will never dare see our shores again, for they will remind them of who we are! Because we are fearless!"

He thought of Astrid, the last time he saw her, the fight they had and the words she had said.

"Because weâ€| are warriors."

* * *

><p>After the cheering died down, the village once again felt alive with action. Those who could walk bustled about waiting for a command rather than a speech, and Hiccup weaved his way through them, gathering supplies. He needed paper, charcoal, and he needed to keep moving. It made Astrid's absence feel as if it would be temporary, and him racing around meant he would get her back faster. He made it back to the platform with the other leaders in tow, a bundle of scrolls in one arm and a handful of broken charcoal in the other.</p>

He dropped them onto the wood and grabbed a scroll from rolling off. He opened it and Cauli sat across from him, holding the corners down. Barb sat one one side of Hiccup and Netmug sat on the other. Barb held the third corner down and Netmug was reluctant to follow suit.

"Impromptu alliance meeting," Hiccup said as he poked through his charcoal for a worthy piece. "A little postponed."

"That's alright, you made up for it," Barb said quietly. She looked up and smiled tightly. Cauli watched Netmug's response and Hiccup caught her.

"If you two won't stop fighting, it'll make everything so much harder," he said bluntly. Cauli looked back at him as if he defiled her father's memory.

"I didn't say anything!" she barked.

"You were thinking it," Hiccup replied. "I'm not picking a fight, but just focus and work with me for a few minutes, and then you can go tear his head off."

Netmug chuckled and Cauli bent her neck to give it a crack. "Fine," she spat.

Hiccup returned to the parchment. "Okayâ€| plans, plansâ€|"

He put his charcoal to the scroll, but stopped. He didn't know where to begin, he didn't really sit in on important meetings his father had, he just drew pictures. Cauli, still angry over Hiccup's interjection over Netmug, cleared her throat.

"How many people do we have?"

"The matrons counted a little over two-hundred," Barb replied quickly. "Based on what we had before, and who we counted for Valhalla, there should be three-hundred with Alvin."

Hiccup wrote that down. "Good, okayâ€| I mean, it's not the best, but it's what we gotâ€|"

Netmug thought about the numbers and scoffed. "We're going to go after an armada that spans a thousand ships with an army of hostile men and dragons with two-hundred people?"

"No, we're going to go ask trader Johann to bring us a thousand veterans to help us out in return for some rotting fish," Cauli seethed. Netmug glared.

"It's what we have," Hiccup interrupted. "And we can't keep them in the Hallâ€|"

He began drawing a quick sketch of Berk.

"We need to start by rebuilding. Fortifying."

Cauli watched. "All our infrastructure on all the islands were built for dragon attacks. They broke easily because we were used to rebuilding them so often."

"We were all like sitting yaks," Netmug agreed. "And if we're staying here, we need something more subtle."

Barb looked over to Netmug and blinked. Cauli sniggered at the sight. "I don't think she's ever heard you say that word before," she snorted.

"Subtleâ€|" Hiccup mused. He drew more of the island and thought. "Iâ€| I don't know how to make plans like my dadâ€| but I have an idea," he said strongly, nodding to Cauli. "Changewingsâ€| are able to change the colour of their skin to match their surroundings, to make it almost impossible to find them." He drew the forest and the rivers with simple lines and tapped the page. "We gathered the armour from the dead?" he asked gently.

Cauli nodded stiffly. "As much as we couldâ€| they kept their swords."

"We can recycle it," he said. "If we make simple homes in the forest using some of that metal as protection from a follow up attack, we can also use the woods to camouflage them."

"So if Alvin comes back, it looks like we left," Cauli said. Hiccup nodded.

"We won't use all the metalâ€| just enough for the Sun Sap."

"Sun Sap?" Netmug asked. Hiccup closed his mouth. He remembered. They didn't know anything about Rose. Or at least, where she came from and the terms that came with her.

"Yeah, it's sticky and burns like the sun, anywayâ€| thought it fit."

He drew little 'x' scribbles to mark where the houses would go, around some small rivers and around the cliffs that scarred Berk.

"What next?"

"Soldiers," Netmug said quickly.

Cauli smiled and said, "Finally, something we can agree on."

Hiccup nodded quickly and drew the forge. "The forge was damaged in the attack, but not too much. We can fix it up real quick, I think. And the cellars in the Hall are still intact. We have leather, ore, dragon skin."

"We need swords," Cauli pressed. "But we need people to use them."

"We have people," Hiccup argued.

"Not everyone knows how to handle a weapon," she countered. "Barb as an example."

Barb twisted her mouth and frowned. Hiccup raised a hand to Cauli, the charcoal staining his fingernails. "I don't know how to use a sword, either," he replied. "I know how to fly dragons, you know how to swing a blade, Netmug too. Barbâ€|"

He trailed off and looked to her. "We'll find something. We'll definitely be training everyone to defend themselves."

Barb shifted sadly, embarrassed for being seemingly useless. Hiccup caught her gaze and chewed the inside of his lip.

"Stand up for a second," he said quickly, jumping to his feet. Barb raised her eyebrows and hesitated before making it to her feet. Hiccup grabbed her skirt and lifted it, looking at her legs.

"What are you doing?!" Netmug cried. Cauli stiffened and fixed her eyes on him, glaring at him. Hiccup met his glare with an empty gaze, too tired to fight, too determined to stand down. He returned his gaze to Barb's legs and nodded.

"You have muscle," he said quickly. Barb squeaked and shoved her skirt down, her face turning into a very scary shade of red. Hiccup turned to Cauli and knelt next to her, touching his hand to her shoulder. She moved her arm away and Hiccup nodded.

"Strong legs, and your shoulder isn't brokenâ€| and none of you weigh too muchâ€|"

"You sure about her?" Netmug spat, gesturing at Cauli. She gasped and

was about to leap at him when Hiccup returned to the paper.

"That's how we're going to win," Hiccup said. "We only have two-hundred sets of hands, and we'd be lucky to get some good fighters out of that!" but!"

Hiccup carved a huge mark into the scroll where the arena stood, his mouth twitching with excitement. Cauli squinted and Barb looked over timidly.

"The only way we can do this is to do it together," he stated. "So! Cauli? If you could ride a dragon, which one would it be?"

And when Cauli's mouth fell open in what could be confused as either horror or shock, Hiccup finally smiled.

25. The Hatch and the Healer

Hello, all! Yes, last week's chapter posting was postponed; the universe threw some things at me that I had to work through first. Enjoy!

* * *

><p>Chapter Twenty-Five: The Hatch and the Healer

When Birdsong first came to retrieve Astrid to work in the hatchery, it had been another handful of days. Days and nights of little sleep and pointless yelling, refusing to eat and staying in the dark shadows of her cell had resulted in nothing. She sat in the corner, shivering, when Birdsong finally unlocked the thick iron lock on the wooden door and hauled the door open. Light from a torch directly across from the door spilled in and stung Astrid's eyes. She covered them with her arm, hissing at the light, as Birdsong entered carefully. She knelt across from her prisoner at a safe distance. She looked at the plates of stale food, meek at best, and frowned.

"Starving yourself won't get you out of here," Birdsong noted coldly. "It'll just save us the waste you make when you don't eat your food."

Astrid didn't say anything. She was in pain, her stomach aching for food and her tongue dry.

Birdsong pursed her lips and pulled her a water skin from her hip. She tossed it to Astrid. Astrid looked at it and averted her gaze.

"Drink," Birdsong demanded. She motioned to the canteen and Astrid cursed under her breath. She was so thirsty, and she reached to the canteen slowly. She closed her hand around it, felt the cool water slosh within it. She wrinkled her nose and threw it back at Birdsong. It was one of the hardest things she had done, but it felt satisfying in the least. Birdsong shook her head and retrieved it, weighing it in her hand. "Funny, people usually fight each other for clean water down here."

"I'm not fighting for necessities," Astrid murmured hoarsely. She swallowed painfully.

"And what are you fighting for exactly? The 'let's see how I can die faster' game?" Birdsong inquired harshly. Astrid didn't answer. She wiped her nose on the back of her hand and Birdsong scoffed.

"Huh."

Astrid wrinkled her nose and tried to stay still as Birdsong stared down at her. The woman sighed in frustration and pinched the bridge of her nose. She crossed the cell and lunged at her, grabbing her arm and sinking her nails into it. Astrid gasped and grabbed Birdsong's hand as she was lifted off the floor roughly. Birdsong dragged her out of the cell and snarled in her face.

"You stink," she grumbled. Astrid sneered at her.

"And what do you expect me to do about that? How long have I been locked down here for, exactly?" she dared to ask.

"Half a moon is what I've counted, you can thank me later. Now get up, it's time to get to work."

"And what the hell do you want?" Astrid rasped, more tears threatening to spill over. "What could â€“ what could I possibly give you after what you've done?"

Birdsong glared and gave her arm another twist. Astrid whimpered.

"You're weak," Birdsong stated. "It's been over a week since I threw your ungrateful arse in here. You haven't eaten and barely had any water, refused to move for days while you sulk in your own filth. Maybe if you chose to take care of yourself â€“ eat, drink, move around â€“ you'd be strong enough to fight me off. But you're not," she spat. "Not yet, anyway. Get moving."

She released Astrid and gave her back a shove towards the cell door. Astrid stumbled forward, her face burning, her legs stiff and starving. Birdsong hovered behind her as they began walking. Her stomach was in knots, her bones rattling with every step. Warm, musty air brushed past her bare legs. They walked down the hall, deeper and deeper in the maze of tunnels. No sunlight had touched Astrid's skin in half a moon, and she found herself yearning for it as the walls surrounded her.

Eventually, the sound of rushing water echoed down the hall. Astrid looked up as Birdsong pushed her to keep moving. They left the hall and entered a small room. Water spilled through a crack in the ceiling, gushing into a small pool that flowed into a grated hole in the wall. Some soldiers were sitting in the water, talking to each other and laughing, silencing when they saw Astrid and Birdsong stand at the edge. They all cocked their chins at her and smiled slyly at each other.

"Shouldn't you be patrolling?" Birdsong asked harshly to the men.

One of the men laughed again. "Shouldn't you be getting naked?"

The two other men both looked at their friend in horror. Birdsong pushed Astrid to the side and, weapon suddenly in hand, flung her dagger in one quick, anger-fuelled motion. The blade slammed into his shoulder and blood streamed over his chest.

"Get out!" one of men cried, leaping out of the pool and running down the hall. The other grabbed his friend and they both made a run for it, the man gasping for air and clutching at the hilt. Astrid felt the colour drain out of her face and Birdsong turned to her.

"Get in," she demanded through gritted teeth. "I am not in the mood for arguing."

Astrid swallowed and looked at the water. It steamed slightly, and looked clear and fresh save for the small cloud of blood at the other edge of the pool. She sat at the edge and dipped her feet into the water, slowly easing herself in.

The water surrounded her and felt wonderfully warm, cleaning the dust and filth from her skin. Birdsong watched scornfully and Astrid looked to her. Birdsong opened the satchel at her hip and tossed her a lump of soap as she muttered to herself. Astrid reached for it and grabbed it as it bobbed on the surface towards her.

"Soap?" she asked.

"You've never heard of it?" Birdsong replied sharply.

"Justâ€| unexpected."

Birdsong rolled her eyes. "Don't take it as a compliment. You smell so bad that the dragons would gag in your presence. I'm not bringing that into the Hatch."

Astrid gulped painfully and grabbed the soap before it floated away from her. She ran it over her arms, scrubbing the dried blood and dirt from her skin. She brought it up her neck and jaw, rubbing it over her face quickly. She quickly grabbed her braid, both greasy and crusty, and untied it, running soapy fingers through her long blonde hair until it was back to its natural colour. She rinsed off and continued using the soap until she was as clean as possible.

"Hurry up," Birdsong demanded. "We have work to do."

Astrid tossed the soap out of the pool and climbed out. She squeezed the water out of her hair and braided it as fast as her fingers would let her, throwing it behind her. She twisted the hem of her shirt to get the water out, but it didn't do a lot of good. Birdsong reached into her satchel again and shoved a set of clothes into Astrid's arms. Astrid moved away slightly. There was no privacy, no way of changing comfortably, but she pulled the wet shirt from her body and dropped it on the ground. The new shirt Birdsong had given her was roughly woven and brown, and it itched the moment she pulled it on. The trousers were no different. Fighting the urge to scratch her skin under her clothes, Astrid sheepishly approached her old clothes, wringing them out and draping them over her arm.

Birdsong marched from the pool and Astrid followed with as much distance as she could. "The pools are not for public use," she stated simply. "Do not take this gesture as one of friendship; I am not your

friend nor will I be. Do you understand?"

"Yes," Astrid replied.

"You will be moved from your current cell to one within the hatchery shortly. That will be your permanent home until further notice; curfew is at last patrol, dinner will be brought to you before that. You will serve me personally as an assistant to the dragons, only due to your previous experience. You will do as I say when I say it and nothing more nor less."

Birdsong turned down another hall, one Astrid had yet to walk down. Astrid heard echoes ahead: a distant chortle, muffled shrieks, the tittering of dragons. She tried to look around Birdsong. She caught sight of a large door blocking their path. Birdsong turned around and Astrid jumped and halted, startled at Birdsong's speed.

"The dragons here are not like dragons at home," Birdsong stated. "Do not make friends with these beasts; Alvin and Dagur use them for what they want. Your job is to get the eggs out of the mother, down to a fire, and repeat. To make friends is to set yourself up for heartbreak down here."

Astrid felt an eye twitch, but she did not move beyond that. Birdsong's light green eyes, framed by a stiff expression, flicked over her face.

"You need a name," she said.

Astrid furrowed her brow. "I have a name."

Birdsong shook her head. "No. I don't care about what you were called. That name is gone. Alvin and Dagur might like knowing but I certainly don't."

Astrid frowned. "I don't have a second name."

Birdsong rolled her eyes. "You'll figure it out."

She turned to the door, her hand on the door ring. She gave it a hard push and the wood scraped over the stone floor. The sound of dragons were instantly clearer, and the glow of fire stung Astrid's eyes. Birdsong motioned Astrid to go in ahead of her. Astrid limped in slowly and Birdsong shut the door behind her.

The hall behind the door was hot and the air was thick. Astrid stifled a cough. The hallway was lined with small doorways leading to small fire-pits in the centre of smaller rooms "almost tiny caverns themselves "surrounded by round objects.

Eggs.

The thought made Astrid linger at one of the doorways. She stopped and bent over, peering into the cavern at the fire-pit and the different eggs. She recognized the eggs as being Gronckle eggs, their thick exteriors looking like rough rock, and there were dozens of them. Women and men wearing the barest of clothing, sweat dripping off their bodies, turned the eggs one by one with hands wrapped in cloth. Their cheekbones were burnt and blistered, their hair sticking to their necks and faces like tendrils of slime. They groaned and

turned the eggs as if they weighed a tonne each. They probably did. Astrid winced and moved onward.

"These are the heating rooms," Birdsong said with a motion to the rooms along the hall. "When the eggs are birthed, we separate them. It is important that we get the mother healed and ready to make new eggs as fast as possible. These fires act as the necessary warmth the mother would usually give to their offspring."

"You don't let them hatch their babies themselves?" Astrid asked. She couldn't help it, the idea made her cringe. Birdsong looked over her shoulder with an eye raised.

"Attachment is a dangerous thing. We take the egg away, they make a new one. Not enough mothers and too much demand."

"But â€œ"

Birdsong gouged her with her eyes once more, and Astrid sighed and shut her mouth.

They continued down the hall towards the body of the hatchery. They emerged into another large natural room, the walls worn smooth and lined with vines that poked through the cracks in the ceiling. It would have been beautiful to Astrid if it weren't for the cages. Mother dragons were crammed into cages too small for their huge bodies. Their wings were cramped, their cries muffled. Nadders, Gronckles, even a Zippleback here and there. A Timberjack had managed to squeeze her slender head through the bars of her cage, but her massive wings held her in. A Cauldron groaned from her own entrapments, her scales a pasty shade of grey and her eyes gummed with mucus. She, like Astrid, needed water.

"These are our mothers," Birdsong said loudly, speaking over the noise of groaning dragons. "We brought them in as babies when we first found this place years ago. We've added a few here and there."

Astrid blinked and looked at all the dragons who looked at her with pleading eyes.

"Our males are brought in from the pit," Birdsong continued. "The males are used for fighting primarily."

"That's terrible," Astrid mumbled.

"I'll let you know when you're opinion is desired."

"But I saw those dragons," Astrid pressed firmly, her voice hoarse from lack of water. "Those weren't fighter dragons, those things I saw were â€œ were â€œ monsters!"

"As dragons should be feared as," Birdsong retorted.

Astrid growled under her breath, and Birdsong turned to her.

"This is your home now. You must get used to it."

"But how can you get used to this?!" Astrid hissed. "How are you so blind that you can't see how wrong this is?!"

"You didn't choose to come here. But you can choose to live here." Birdsong rolled her shoulders and pulled her waterskin from her hip once more. She threw it to Astrid, who caught it sloppily and looked at it in her hands. Birdsong smirked. "Choose your battles, Wildling. It'll keep you alive."

Astrid wrinkled her nose, but she took the hint as it was offered. She pulled the cork and brought the water to her lips, sipping at the water to take a small trickle of water over her tongue. She didn't dare take more, only enough, and she sealed it. She threw it back to Birdsong, who smiled wryly.

"You'll serve well," Birdsong noted. "Assuming you learn to keep that mouth shut."

Suddenly, a loud, bloodcurdling shriek tore through the cavern. It bounced off the walls and smashed into the women. Astrid cried out and ducked, covering her ears. Birdsong crouched, holding her hand out to Astrid as if to tell her to get down. Men and women rushed out of a hallway on the other side of the cavern. Some screamed, one limped as fast as they could with a bloody hand over their bloody face.

"Get out!" a woman screamed. "She's out!"

Astrid squeezed her eyes shut, a pain throbbing in the centre of her forehead. It was hot and fiery and it crashed into her again and again, something pressing, something pushing, something forcing its way into her mind.

NO!

Astrid's knees gave out, the dragon speak wriggling in violently. The pain was immense; it knocked Astrid to the ground and Birdsong stepped away in surprise. Another shriek rocked the hatchery and Astrid groaned.

"Look out!"

Astrid looked up in time to see fire belch from the hall's entrance. Birdsong grabbed her sword. "Shit!" she barked. "Get up, Wildling," she demanded, hauling Astrid to her feet. "We need to get out!"

"What?" Astrid argued.

"Come!"

Birdsong waved for the rest of the workers to flee to the exit as a Monstrous Nightmare slithered forth. Her skin was alight in the hottest of flame, her huge belly contracting and contorting. She roared again and Birdsong shoved Astrid forward into the mouth of the exiting hall, where people were frantically filing out.

"I need to keep my people safe," Birdsong said. She opened her satchel again, pulling out a dart flute and a dart, loading it with precision. She raised it to her mouth. Astrid wrenched on her arm, stepping around her, and the dart flew from the flute. Birdsong stumbled back and Astrid fell onto her backside, the dart sticking

out of her leg. Birdsong's face contorted into rage as Astrid ripped it out as fast as she could, pain ebbing into her thigh.

When Birdsong pulled her sword free again, her eyes set on Astrid, Astrid scrambled back. It was either Birdsong or the dragon, and frankly, the dragon was Astrid's saving grace. The clothes still in her hand from the bath, Astrid hurled them into Birdsong's face, blinding her long enough to make it to her feet, racing back into the cavern where the Nightmare hissed and coated the walls with sticky fire. She skittered to a halt as the dragon glared at her. She was poised, her target locked, her lips twitching over sharpened teeth. Astrid groaned and pressed a hand to her leg, which began to grow numb.

Youâ€| murder.

Astrid's hands flew up, a gesture of peace and fear. "Wait â€“"

The Nightmare lunged for her, and Astrid bolted. The dragon slithered after her like a snake sliming through oil, and Astrid dove behind a barrel lid. She grabbed it, her immediate shield, just before a ball of slimy fire hit it. She felt her fingers burn and she gasped and dropped the lid. Her fingers should have been burnt to a crisp, and they certainly felt like it, but her fingers were merely pinkened by the attack. The dragon snapped her jaws at Astrid, and Astrid bent back, barely avoiding harm. She twisted to the side, and the dragon missed a second time.

But the third time, Astrid felt the dragon's teeth sink into her arm, and she squealed and screamed as she felt her arm twist. The dragon let go, ready to attack again, but she coiled back. Her belly quivered and she snarled, the pain of her labour setting in once more. She was about to lay her egg, but the pain was too much. She was a young dragon, a teenager in comparison, too small to lay an egg yet ready to. Astrid held her arm, tears coating her face and her breaths laboured. Her arm was broken, mangled at her side, and her leg was completely limp.

The Nightmare looked up again, panting, her skin still on fire in dull flames. _Youâ€| murder_.

"No," Astrid choked. "I don't."

The dragon blinked and slinked forward weakly. _You speak?_

Astrid began to shake, her belly in nauseous knots. She couldn't breathe, she was already too tired, too feeble. The dragon snuffed her snout against Astrid's chest and lingered over her breast. She retreated.

â€| Saviour, she murmured. Astrid's uninjured hand rested over her chest where the Night Fury scale rested. Her hips were numb, her other leg completely limp and lifeless. _But howâ€| the Saviourâ€| gone._

"No," Astrid wheezed. "No."

The Nightmare glared again, her irises flickering into different sizes, unsure. _Notâ€| gone? Notâ€| poison?_

Astrid shook her head quickly, her bloody arm slowly numbing, the blood warm and coating her. The heat from the dragon was unbearable as the flames flickered closer towards her face.

"I was poisoned," Astrid said quickly, sucking in a breath through gritted teeth. "Not the Saviour, not the Saviour, please" She gasped as her bloody arm cramped.

The dragon growled. You know pain? It rips body, mind.

"That pain is going to disappear," Astrid promised. "Not yet, but it will. But you have to work to make it stop."

The Nightmare shook her head from side to side violently. Astrid tensed and cowered.

Unsafe. Eggs, danger, the Nightmare seethed.

Astrid licked her lips nervously, trying to search for the words as numbness crept up her body.

"I know you feel unsafe," Astrid reassured. "But I'm here. Just look at me. Okay?"

The Nightmare glared and panted loudly through her flared nostrils. Promiseâ€| safe?

Astrid nodded immediately. "Yes. â€|Safeâ€| safe with me."

The Nightmare cooed sadly and the fire over her skin slowly faded. She let her legs give out, her wings fanning over the ground, her head resting on Astrid's legs.

You know? You know pain? it asked sadly.

Astrid breathed in sharply.

I feel it. You know pain.

Astrid felt tears well in her eyes.

Pain? You speak?

Astrid couldn't feel her lips. She tried to talk but she couldn't. The numbness was crawling over her pervertedly and the Nightmare knew it.

You give hope. The Saviour gives hope.

Astrid's eyes began to droop. Her head began to lull, and she fell into the darkness once more, the numbness dragging her down into a dangerous sleep.

* * *

><p>She had no time. Stupid, stupid girl! The last thing she needed was this on her plate, the last thing she needed was something noticeable. She didn't know how to hide this, and she didn't know how she had been so lucky so far to not run into anyone.. Birdsong grunted and hoisted Astrid in her arms to better carry her, rushing

down a darkened hallway. The hall lead to the Hatch dorms, the rooms where the Hatchery workers lived. Astrid's head lolled over Birdsong's arm, her face pale and her arm red. At least bleeding wasn't uncommon here; no one would think to investigate.<p>

She managed to struggle to the last door. It was a ways off from the rest. She kicked the door twice and almost lost her grip on Astrid's body. She grabbed her before she hit the floor and looked behind her to see if she had been followed.

She heard hands touching the door from the other side.

"Who is it?" she heard Stargazer ask.

"It's me, open the door!" she replied.

The door opened slowly and Stargazer peeked between the crack made by the door and the stone frame. 'Peeked' wouldn't have been the most appropriate term; Stargazer had lost her sight to a blade years ago and the scars had been bandaged over with strips of browned fabric. But she could hear well, and her healing touch was the best anyone could offer. That, and Birdsong trusted her more than anyone else.

"Birdy?" Stargazer asked timidly. "Is that you?"

"Aye, 'tis. Let me in."

"What's going on?" her friend asked. She tilted her chin up and wrinkled her brow under her bandages.

"One of the girls got injured in the Hatch. She needs help."

Stargazer pursed her lips and sighed. She opened the door for Birdsong. Birdsong dragged Astrid in and Stargazer shut the door, locking it shut once more. She turned and crossed the room along the wall, feeling it for obstacles and the bumps that told her where to go. Birdsong had already dropped Astrid on the spare bed.

"What happened?" Stargazer asked as she felt her way back to Birdsong.

"Stupid girl got in between me and a Nightmare," Birdsong spat as she cut away Astrid's sweater. "Got a dart in the thigh and the beast snapped her arm like a twig."

"Oh my. Let me."

Birdsong grabbed Stargazer's hands and put them to Astrid's arm. Stargazer felt the raw flesh with her slender hands.

"She's lost a lot of blood?" she asked.

"A fair bit," Birdsong confirmed.

Stargazer felt the tooth marks slowly and nodded once. "On the table. Strips and poultice to stop the bleeding and infection."

"It'll have to come out of your stash."

Stargazer hesitated, but she felt over Astrid's body.

"Why?"

Birdsong chewed her lip and ran her hands over her brown hair, braided down her back under her hood. "She's new, brought in half a moon ago."

Stargazer sighed. "You know Alvin wouldn't like this very much. And if he finds out â€" "

"He won't."

"Alright. "

Birdsong knelt next to the bed and felt under it for the bag of extra supplies, hoarded over the moons for such occasions. She pulled it forth and rummaged in it for the rolls of bandages and a half-empty vial of potion for abrasions. She brought them over and placed them into Stargazer's hands. She held them for a moment as she kept her face pointed at Astrid's.

"She's from Berk," she noted quietly. "She's a Berkian."

Birdsong caught her breath and stared at Stargazer.

"How â€" "

"Her hair. It's braided with a four-piece style instead of the usual three-piece. I taught it to my daughters during my time there. What's her name?"

"Wildling is her name now," Birdsong replied firmly. "Now can you wrap it or not?"

"Of course I can, I just â€" "

"Please!"

"But why? Why work so hard to save her?"

Birdsong blinked. "Excuse me?"

Stargazer sat back on her legs and shrugged. "She's from Berk, not one of us. And she's new. That, and she goes ahead on her first day and almost gets killed. Why work so hard?"

"She, along with everyone else, is not disposable," Birdsong said stiffly. "She's very important to our cause. She's a warrior, albeit stubborn as an ass, and she's one of those dragon riders we've been hearing so much about."

Stargazer let out an interested sound. She unravelled the bandages and began to tie them around Astrid's arm. Astrid moaned and twitched. Birdsong looked over to her.

"You should have seen her. She just ran in there as everyone else ran out. This huge Nightmare burst out, skim aflame, and she ran out there. The dart should have taken her down a lot faster than it did but sheâ€| she was talking to it."

Stargazer turned her head towards Birdsong. "She spoke to it?"

"To calm it."

"Ahâ€| well there's good news and bad news. The good news is I think she'll be okay."

Birdsong sighed with relief. "Gods be good. I was so worried."

"The bad newsâ€| the dart is meant to put a dragon to rest for a long, long while. Days, maybe weeks. I made it to keep them down for a very long time."

"I'm aware."

"So if it's in a humanâ€| it will be a very, very long time before she wakes. I don't know how long. But it will be dangerous. Very dangerous."

Birdsong processed that for a moment. She nodded slowly, understanding without wanting to. She sat in a chair and sighed. "I spent years thinking the riders were myth, but now they're here."

"It's cruel," Stargazer muttered.

"But think of how we could use them. I mean, we managed to keep this one aliveâ€| the other one we have is Dagur's new petâ€| so I wouldn't put much coin on her. But Wildling has heart, she will do well for us."

"If you can keep her alive, that is."

Birdsong scoffed. "That'll be easy. We're moving her in. Today. We can't delay."

Stargazer laughed. "I thought her cell was outside the Hatch."

"Not anymore. With her under like this, she can't be alone, Star. Keep this one alive with you. She's going to give us that hope we finally deserve."

26. A Moon-Long Dream

_Good morning (at least for Pacific lads and lasses)! Happy Saturday, and have a good week, everybody. _

* * *

><p>Chapter Twenty-Six: A Moon-Long Dream

She smelled flowers. Taking deep, delicious breaths, Astrid felt the rare tickle of pollen on her nose, and she squeezed her eyes shut as she felt her head fall to the side. Something brushed against her cheek and she slowly brought her hand to it. She peeled her eyes open and blurry visions turned into sharp sights of grass. She watched the grass shift in the wind gently before she sat up slowly.

She was back in Berk. Not in the village, but she was definitely in Berk. The grass was long and she combed her fingers through it slowly, smiling at the softness of it, the healthiness of it. It felt fresh, edible, beautiful. She looked around at the familiar place around herself and pushed herself onto her feet. She turned in a slow circle and took it all in: the water on the far side of the area looked crystal clear and inviting, and beyond that were tall walls covered in tangles of vines that let lush leaves break away and fly in the gentle breeze. This felt safe. This felt like home.

The cove was where some of the biggest moments in her life had happened. She met Toothless here, and he would change her life, her whole outlook on dragons. She took away her innocence here, just behind that boulder. She fought with Hiccup in front of that big tree with those rocks just at the trunk, lightly dusted in soft moss. Everything was there, as it should be, as it was meant to be.

She felt the tickle of her hair down her back, and found herself almost naked, her hair free and her skin clean and soft. She ran her hands through it and sighed loudly, delightfully. This didn't phase her. It calmed her, it embraced her, it became a part of her. She opened her eyes slowly and glanced at the rays of sunlight breaking through the evergreen trees at the top rim of the cove. Shadows danced over her arms and face and she hummed at the warm feeling of it.

She let her gaze fall down and she found herself looking at people, people who weren't there before.

Her throat caught for a moment at the sight of a broad man sitting at the edge of the pond. His blonde and bushy beard fell over his massive chest, his brown eyes looking into the water with a calm interest. He wore a formal shirt, tight over his thick arms, and the wrinkles that peppered his face made him look majestic. Astrid let her mouth fall open and she took a step towards him.

"Dad?" she asked, barely above a whisper. The man blinked and looked over. He looked at Astrid and squinted slightly, his mouth falling open as she slowly walked to him. He jumped to his feet and rushed over. He held his hands out to her and hesitated, just feet apart from each other.

"How?" he asked quickly. "Where â€“ no, it can't be, I â€“"

Astrid couldn't contain herself. She leapt into his arms and he crushed her. It was all coming back, now. The smell of his skin, the sound of his voice, the way he held her over her shoulders so she would have to try to wrap her arms around him.

"How are you here?" he asked, his face buried in her hair. Astrid pulled away.

"Iâ€| I don't know. What is this place?"

Her father looked around and shrugged. "It'sâ€| it's a crossroads," he said tentatively. "An in-between."

Astrid blinked. "You mean I'm dead?"

Her dad looked over her and wrinkled her brow. "I don't think so. I

mean, I certainly hope you're not, but if you were dead, you'd know it."

It all came back to her in a rush. "The dart. No, I got hit by some sort of dartâ€| by Birdsong. And if it didn't kill me, then I guess it put me under slumber. But I've never been here before."

Astrid huffed and looked around again as her father crossed his arms and hummed in his chest. "I think it may be your blood."

She looked over and raised her eyebrows. Her father nodded as he thought about the possibility. He sat again at the side of the pond and Astrid followed. "You know of the dragon's blood," she stated. "I had a friend who told me that dragons can sometimes visit Valhalla in their dreams." Astrid looked around herself in awe. "I meanâ€| that's the only thing that comes to mindâ€|" She knelt against his shoulder and sighed. "Soâ€| I'm dreaming."

"You're definitely not awake, dear."

"But I'm not dead?"

"Noâ€| I'd know you were coming if you were."

Astrid shifted and turned so she was facing him better. "But you know where I am. Physically?"

Her father looked down at his hands and stayed still for a moment. His shoulders sank and he nodded gently.

Astrid pursed her lips and watched him watch his hands.

"Believe me, if I could get you out of there, I would," he said.

"I know you would."

Her father sighed shakily and he swallowed the lump in his throat. Astrid fiddled with a blade of grass between her fingers. But around her, shadows formed and became images. Something caught her eye and she peered over. Her father looked over as well and smiled a tight smile.

Sigourney, his wife and Astrid's mother, sat leaning against a tree. Her curly blonde hair cascaded around her body as she played with a blue bracelet tied around her wrist. Astrid's voice made a strangulated sound. Her father put his hand over hers, still playing with the blade of grass, and gave it a squeeze. She wanted to say something. But another shadow formed next to Sigourney over the water. Snowdrop shimmered into sight next to her mother, although they didn't notice each other, and played in a mud puddle, giggling and laughing. Astrid felt her throat tighten and tears sprung to her eyes.

"Mum? Snowdrop?"

"They won't hear you if you speak," her father murmured. "We can only watch."

Crying, Astrid looked over to her dad. "Why? I can talk to you, why can't they hear me?"

"I'm dead," he said simply. "And they are merely dreaming."

"They're alive? Snow â€“ Snowdrop, too? And mum?"

Her father smiled again. "No Hofferson goes down easily, child."

Snowdrop was alive. Astrid put a hand over her mouth as if her heart would leap out of her body and into her palm. But Snowdrop was alive, and that's all that mattered in the moment. She was alive and her dreams were happy and she looked healthyâ€¦ and her mother was, too. She was still out there, wandering the world, probably looking for her daughters. It was the first ray of light Astrid had since the battle.

She heard a twig break behind her. Astrid and her father turned and gazed upon another woman as she wandered around the cove. Astrid furrowed her brow as she noticed Rose and she touched the walls of the cove gingerly. Why would Rose be there?

"That's the girl who saved your life?" her father asked.

Astrid pursed her lips. "Yesâ€¦ but I don't know why she'd be here."

"Your dreamland is filled with people who used to matter to you, who matter to you now, and who has yet to matter to you. And then there are people whoâ€¦ may not mean anything to you at all."

Astrid groaned quietly. "That's a lot of people."

"Exactly. See, your family is here. And the girl who saved you. Sometimes other people come and go. Other times, they stay for your eternity. Maybe you never know someone you see here because their role in your life is so minusculeâ€¦ but they are still here."

Astrid wiped away the drying tears from her cheeks. Her father gave her shoulder a rub.

"Go explore it, darling."

She looked at him, unsure. But he gave her a push and she was on her feet. She hesitantly walked. She felt awkward moving for no particular reason, but she wandered around anyway. And the more she moved, the more shadows she saw, and they morphed into familiar and unfamiliar faces. People she expected â€“ Stoick, Gobber, Gothi â€“ appeared and disappeared, and people she had yet to meet caught her attention. A man with a fire-scarred face waded into the pool and floated on his back, staring at the sky. A woman with light brown hair and pale skin sat at the boulder where Astrid had used the knife on herself, weaving something yet to be noticed out of tiny pieces of grass and sticks and straw. Birdsong even appeared, standing at the very edge of the cove, arms crossed and eyes closed as if she had a headache.

But she didn't care for any of that right now. The person that she wanted to see more than anyone was no where to be found. Hiccup didn't appear from any of the shadows. He just wasn't there. Her father must have sensed that. He straightened his back and licked his

lips, rubbing the corner of his eye.

"Your Hiccup hasn't been sleeping lately," he said.

Astrid paused and looked around again as if he'd show up from a shadow she hadn't checked yet. "But I've seen everybody," she argued. "People I don't even want in my dreamland are here and gone."

"Only when they're sleeping do they show," he replied. "And timeâ€œ time is so different here. Your mother and Snowdrop only faded away moments ago, yet the sun is peaking in their world. Some people have already reappeared from sleeping, waking, and sleeping again."

Astrid balked. "But that's â€œ I mean â€œ so if Hiccup is not here, and hasn't been here this whole time â€œ"

"That's two days of not sleeping," her father concluded. "And if he does, it's not deep enough to dream."

She felt her forehead wrinkle as her face contorted into sadness. "Butâ€œ I need to see him," she choked.

Her father sighed again and shook his head. Astrid gulped painfully and she sat on the ground. She held herself and watched the ripples of the water, trying desperately not to cry or scream.

"You miss him," he murmured, sitting next to her. Astrid sniffled loudly and nodded, touching her fingers to her forehead.

"You know Gothi?" she asked, her question nasally and followed by another wet sniffle. "I mean, do you remember her?"

Her father narrowed his eyes before a faint realization flickered behind his gaze. "Yeahâ€œ short, shaman lady? Quiet?"

"She said something to meâ€œ a few days before Hiccup and I were married."

Her father raised his eyebrows. Astrid smiled again, wiping her nose on the back of her head.

"I didn't think she talked, butâ€œ at the end of our conversation â€œ and it wasn't much to begin with, she chooses her words wisely when she speaks â€œ she said something to me."

"And what was that, my wee Flightmare?"

"She said that Hiccup wasn't supposed to beâ€œ someone I just live with," Astrid murmured gently. Her throat seized and she whimpered. Her father rubbed her shoulder again and Astrid sucked in a breath. "He's supposed to be someone I can't live without."

Astrid squeezed her eyes shut and her father watched two fat tears pour from her eyelashes. He shifted closer towards her and pulled her against his chest.

"And I'm trying so hard," she cried. "I really am and â€œ"

"Hush, lass. It's alright. You spend too much time being brave, it's

okay to cry. You're safe here. You know you'll see him again. You know that in your heart. Your soul."

"All I feel is this pain."

"And that pain will stop when you see him next. But you know what?"

"What?"

"He's not here now. It means he's not dead. Hold onto that thought for as long as you can and it will keep you from drowning."

Her father sighed once more. He held her and rocked her gently until her tears dried on her face, until the redness in her cheeks faded to pink and back to pale rose. And once she had a moment to breathe, she opened her eyes and everything was quiet. There were no shadows turning into faces. There were no dreamers scattered about save for one or two at a time. She was almost completely alone in this world, and for once, it actually felt safe. There was nothing to think about here, and no timeframe to act. She only had to sit and watch the water for her body to wake up from the dart. Then she'd be back in hell. But she didn't want to worry about that right now.

She lied there, thinking and looking at the sky above, when it suddenly became very dark. She squinted, the stars blinking out almost all at once. They were replaced by heavy clouds that threatened to spill over. She sat up slowly and looked around. There were no dreamers around her, only the cove. Footsteps approached and Astrid jumped to her feet. She skittered back as a figure forced his way into the cove and stumbled forward. This was no shadow. This was something different.

Hiccup staggered into the safety of the cove, his legs stiff and his gut sore, his eyes heavy and his heart cramping painfully in his chest. He looked over his shoulder to make sure no one had followed him. Even Toothless did not notice him leave the Hall in the dead of night, the countless sheets of parchment with charcoal scribbles dancing on the back of his eyelids. Everything was piling up. Everything. Building new houses in the forest needed new blueprints. Building new weapons needed new designs. Leading fearful people needed fearlessness.

How could he be fearless when he couldn't sleep? When nightmares plagued light sleep and kept him from staying in bed? Losing his house, losing their bed, the furs upon them that smelled so much of Astrid's hair, didn't help. Sleeping in the Hall among sobbing women and angry men didn't help. Sleeping outside under the storm clouds didn't help. He didn't know how much longer he could keep planning, keep leading, without rest.

He didn't know where to go. He just started walking in the dead of night and arrived here. And when he let his body crumple into the ground and felt the grass brush his fingertips, he felt some tension lift in his shoulders. Something small, a little progress. A little progress — the smallest ray of numbness — was the most he could ask for. It had been an entire moon since Astrid was stolen. The bodies were burned and their armour scavenged. The destroyed foundations had been dug out and new houses were being erected from the damaged timber in the woods. The forest was now speckled with

tiny huts and tree-houses for the villagers to live away from enemy sight.

They had even made a Hangar for the dragons. Against a hidden cliff by the arena, a huge building was built in honour of the wild dragons that had flown in to help them through the battle. Most chose to stay for Hiccup's cause of avenging the fallen, awaiting orders, waiting for the day they would find the new Outcast and Berserker outpost and blow it to Valhalla. The Hangar was almost complete through Netmug's relentlessness of ordering her remaining soldiers to take up hammers instead of their swords. Yesterday, they had completed it. They secured gigantic storm doors to the entrance — a suggestion made by Netmug that sounded crazy until Cauli reluctantly agreed with him — and within the Hangar, all the dragons stayed safe. So long as they could keep Berk looking like a war-torn abandoned village, the Outcasts and Berserkers had no reason to return.

So long as they could keep them away, they could rebuild and go after them.

But none of that made Hiccup feel better as he slouched in the cove, staring at his reflection in the pond. He didn't want to think of plans or buildings or saddles or how to get Cauli on a dragon (which already had taken three weeks of unsuccessful begging). He just wanted to think of Astrid. And it made him feel horrible. He always thought of the last fight they'd had. The last real conversation when Astrid pulled him to the side of the Hall. And he had brought up the baby. He covered his face again and felt sobs clutch at his organs. He wept into his palms, thinking of her face when he dared argue with her about whether or not it was still there. Of course it wasn't, he knew that in his heart when he found her bloody in the bed, but it was different when he saw it in Astrid's eyes that it was true. And then she was gone. There was no time to apologize. Sure, they made love that night knowing what was coming, and sure, they knew that there was a chance things would end tragically.

He never thought it would feel like this.

He let his body ease into the ground and he wrapped his arms around himself and he let himself weep into the soil beneath his pale face. And it made him feel better. After three weeks of theatrical leadership, he could finally have some privacy. And he felt a warmth rush up his back as he did so, and his eyes grew heavier and heavier. The water rippled around him and he hardly noticed. Was it a trick of the eye? He couldn't tell.

But Astrid was lying in front of him, her body half in the pond in her dreamland. She watched him and only wanted time to slow down. She reached forward and hovered her palm over his face, over his eyes, and watched as his face began to relax. She stayed there with him, biting back her own tears, as she focused her energy into her hand.

"Sleep, my darling," she whispered.

And Hiccup's eyes finally drooped. He tried to keep them open, but Astrid ran her hand gently over them again, not sure if it was doing anything at all, but she had to try. Astrid smiled sadly and ran her palm over his eyes again, knowing he couldn't see her or feel her or hear her. He finally relaxed and she hovered her hand over his chest,

slipping her hand into his torso and imagining where his heart would be. She stayed with him as his body began tumbling into the dreamworld.

The shadows returned around Astrid as she returned with him, and Hiccup wandered around the cove looking at the trees around him as Astrid watched from the other side of the pond, wishing he could see her and happy he had finally fallen asleep. Her father was behind her, staring at the back of his daughter's head, questions tugging at his mind.

* * *

><p>Hiccup returned to the village the next morning, his body rejuvenated albeit his puffy eyes and swollen face. Toothless met him and nuzzled against his chest, begging for a scratch behind his fins. He sniffed his rider and pulled away, eyes wondering.</p>

Where did you go?

"I went for a walk, needed to clear my head."

You should be trying to sleep. I worry.

Hiccup smiled. "I actually did sleep last night."

Toothless's eyes widened and his tongue began to peek between his scaly lips, a sign of happiness.

_The forge was finished this morning. We can craft saddles. Train. Search. We are in the final stages of your plans. _

"I like the sound of that."

He began to follow Toothless as he galloped down the hill in excitement, his thoughts returning to his dreams the night before. He could have sworn he saw her, a blurry figure on the other side of a lake, a warmth at his heart that lingered through the morning.

27. Family and Friends

Happy Saturday, everybody! Hope you had a great couple of weeks.

* * *

><p>Chapter Twenty-Seven: Family and Friends

"It's not muchâ€¦ but it'll work," Gobber said. Hiccup nodded in agreement as he looked at the forge, the last thing to be completed, finally deemed ready for full use. Saddles, swords, shields, armour â€" there were more possibilities, and the second stage of Hiccup's plan could begin, now that the houses and Hangar were done.

"We used most of our stores to supply the storm doors and the roofs of the houses," Gobber continued. "But now the forge is done, we can make the little things that will help us out there."

"Sounds good," Hiccup noted. "Once we get some saddles crafted, then we can start training the ridersâ€¦ which will probably take another

moon just to get some basic flight down â€“"

"Get the doubt outta your voice," Gobber remarked. "You've managed to get the whole village rehoused and fortified in one moon, a feat that would take anyone else much longer."

"Yeah, wellâ€|"

Gobber rolled his eyes. "You've got a gift for this kinda thing, Hiccup."

"I draw, Gobber."

"Can you imagine me doing your job? I'd say, 'let's build a saddle,' and you'd end up with a bad cabbage harvest and a yak with gut problems. You draw, I stick dragon teeth back into their heads. We make it work."

Hiccup sighed as he walked through the forge, touching the metal and finding the tools all over again. "At least I'll be able to build things. I need to do something with my hands."

"I know the feeling. What's your next project?"

"I don't know, yet," Hiccup shrugged. He blew a breath of air through his lips in thought. "I have to upgrade my sword to make it actually usable; Johann is obviously not coming around to trade anymore so I have to find something else to make the blade light up."

"And why exactly does the sword have to be on fire?" Gobber asked.

"Besides the fact that it earns the trust of dragons and provides some extra damage potential?"

"I think you like it because you think it's cool," Gobber mumbled.

"Hah-hah, very funny."

Hiccup pulled his shield from his back and placed it on one of the work benches. He pulled the sword from his belt and set it next to the shield. He stared at it for a time and Gobber looked over his shoulder. "So? What's wrong with it?"

"The blade pops out of the hilt when I push this button; it keeps the blade away from my leg when I'm flying. But I put the oil into the hilt to coat the blade where a tiny piece of flint ignites it. Only it's now water-logged and there's no oil in it anymore. And I can't keep using the oil supply when we need it for the forge."

Gobber put a fist to his lips. "Hmm. We could look into finding a different material to coat the blade. The flint could still ignite it."

"I'm still thinking of what it could be. I've been thinking about Monstrous Nightmare saliva maybeâ€| something I can use less of and yet replenish it more often."

Gobber laughed. "Yes, I'd love to see you walk up to Hookfang and

ask, 'Oi, may I have some of your spit for my knife?'"

"It's worth a shot," Hiccup said, chipper. "At least I'm good with words. And then I'm thinking about adding some extra flair to the sword in some way."

"You are going to walk away from this fight with your eyebrows burnt off and your beard on fire."

"Yeah, my non-existent baby beard that you think is adorable."

"Well, it is."

Hiccup snorted and rubbed his chin reflexively. He stared at the tool on the bench and nodded to himself.

"I've got some ideas already. But for nowâ€| saddles. Just the basics; I don't want to waste any material and I need as many as possible for all the dragons in the Hangar."

"Alright, I'll recruit some friends to be my blacksmiths and I'll get on it."

Hiccup smiled and nodded once before exiting the forge.

"Hey, Hiccup?" Gobber called. Hiccup stopped and turned. Gobber smiled, the corners of his eyes twitching. "You're doing a good job. Your dadâ€| he'd be proud."

Hiccup felt his cheeks warm. He swallowed and licked his lips.
"Thanks, Gobber."

With that comment in his head, and the warmth still tingling in his chest, he climbed the hill to the Hall as quick as he could, glancing at the rotting timbers of the broken houses. He had to remind himself why he chose to keep the disaster visible. It was for the enemy, to make it seem like they were still winning. He still averted his eyes and entered the Hall.

There were less people inside; the faster they could completely evacuate the Hall for safety's sake, the better. But the leaders usually stayed within in case meetings had to be had, and Stoick stayed in in the meeting room for fear of moving him. He walked through the hall and around the piles of rubble, slowing at the sight of two people he hadn't talked to in a what seemed like a very long time.

"Hey, look who's here," Snotlout quipped. Tuffnut looked up from his sleeping mat on the floor, his complexion returning to a more normal tone. Hiccup awkwardly stopped and swayed. Half of him wanted to stay. The other half wanted to run away. He'd been so busy tackling the village's rebuilding plans that he had little time to touch base with his friends.

"Hey, guys," Hiccup murmured sheepishly. Snotlout waved him over and Snotlout clasped his back. Tuffnut looked between them from the mat, his eyes red.

"How you holding up?" Hiccup asked Snotlout.

"Finally got Swamplout to sleep through the night," Snotlout replied sorely. "Still hard without Wormha."

Hiccup nodded and looked to Tuffnut, who's expression was laced with hints of anger and despair.

"I'm not about to sugar-coat it like you two," he spat. "Losing Ruffnut is terrible. Losing Astrid and Wormha is terrible. And I'm not about to try to hide my feelings about anything."

"No one is asking you to, Tuff," Snotlout said calmly.

"Yeah, well no one has asked me how I feel. A whole moon goes by and yet no one stops in to see how I'm doing."

Snotlout wrinkled his nose and Hiccup shut his mouth, taken aback by the comment. "What are you talking about?" Snotlout asked with bitterness in his voice. "All people have been doing is making sure you're okay."

"No, they changed my bandages. But I lost my sister. My twin sister. And no one has asked how I am without her."

"We know it's hard for you Â“" Hiccup began. "And I am trying as hard as I can to prepare ourselves to get everyone back."

Tuffnut scoffed and shook his head. "I lost Ruffnut. And through her, I lost our dragon. And I feel I've lost my friends along the way."

Hiccup was about to say something when Snotlout growled and snarled, his face contorting into rage. Hiccup grabbed Snotlout as he bounded for Tuffnut.

"At least what you lost can be temporary!" Snotlout yelled.

"Snotlout, enough!" Hiccup cried, hauling his friend back. "Both of you, stop it!"

He looked between the two of them, his mouth open from sheer horror and shock. Snotlout tore away from Hiccup and Tuffnut averted his eyes.

"Tuff, Snotlout is not the enemy, Alvin is!"

"You're not the only one who's lost everything," Snotlout spat quietly. "Not by a long shot."

"Whatever," Tuffnut replied.

Hiccup rubbed his eyes and groaned into his hands as Snotlout left in a fury. Tuffnut didn't look up at Hiccup, who stared down at his friend.

"This is the part where you walk away," Tuffnut said.

Hiccup didn't move. He pursed his lips and heard his ears ring. "No. This is the part where I look at you and wonder where your optimism

went."

Tuffnut didn't reply.

"We will get them back. I know how you feel; you're not alone."

"You weren't hurt," Tuffnut argued. Hiccup was about to say something before he closed his mouth. Then, without pondering on his idea too hard, he unbuckled his pants. Tuffnut looked up and leaned back, confused and concerned. Hiccup pulled his pants down to his knees, revealing nothing underneath but a pair of shorts to prevent chafing from riding Toothless. Then, he hiked up his chest piece over his ribs. Tuffnut looked up timidly, and grimaced violently. Hiccup kept staring at Tuffnut, taking in his reaction without one of his own. He knew what Tuffnut saw: across his belly, puckered slightly and framed in lightning scars, was the wound the Skrill had inflicted on him. And on his thigh was the divot where the Sun Sap had hit his leg, so hot that it burnt a disgusting scar into his flesh permanently.

"Like I said," Hiccup reiterated bluntly, "you're not alone."

And he hiked up his pants and pulled down his chest piece and buckled everything back together. He nodded to Tuffnut once and left, heading straight to his father's chamber as Tuffnut stared at the floor. He entered the chamber quietly and forced himself to look at his dad. It was never any less painful to see his father's body lose its muscle and colour. But he was still alive and breathing. Only just.

Snowdrop looked over to Hiccup and smiled. "Did Astrid come home?" she asked again, as she did everyday.

"No, not yet," Hiccup replied yet again.

"I was just telling her how the forge was completed today," Rose said, emerging from the corner of the room. Hiccup snapped his gaze over to her and locked his jaw at the sight of her.

"Rose wants to talk to you," Snowdrop said with another toothy grin. Hiccup swallowed painfully.

"Well, I wish Rose would speak for herself when she wants something from me," he said slowly, staring at her from across the room. Snowdrop's smile slowly disappeared.

"Is she in trouble?" she asked. Hiccup looked at Snowdrop and picked her up.

"No," he lied, his voice tight. "I'd be happy to talking to her. Outside."

"I'm not going anywhere," Rose said, suddenly cold. "We can discuss things here. In front of Stoick."

Hiccup sighed angrily and carried Snowdrop to the door. He rested her down on a sack of barley outside the door. After a quick word of reassurance, he left Snowdrop and reentered the chamber. He shut the door and turned to face Rose, who stared back at him from over Stoick's sleeping body.

"I thought you were above lying to children," she noted.

"Don't you dare," Hiccup sneered. "Don't you dare talk about lying to my face."

"Shall I talk behind your back, instead? Or can we have a civilized conversation now?"

"What do you want?" Hiccup asked, annoyed. Rose scoffed and looked down at Stoick. She sighed and stared at him before looking back to Hiccup, her fiery hair mirroring Stoick's streaks in his own.

"How are you?" she asked.

Hiccup balked and cocked his head. "Are you serious? 'How are you?' Is that some kind of sick joke?"

"It wasn't meant to be," Rose stated simply. "I'm only trying to reach out."

"After what you've done?"

Rose rolled her eyes. "Gods, Hiccup! When will you start thinking beyond that?!"

"Beyond the time you failed to mention that Astrid had been captured by Alvin the Treacherous? I'll let you know when I'm even remotely forgiving."

Rose closed her eyes and wrinkled her brow, a pained expression mapped over her face. "I don't know how many times I can apologize to you. But I've already told you, I did so for your protection."

"No," Hiccup said shakily. "No, you don't get to come out of Outcast Island and feel like you have to do terrible things in the name of my protection. You have no right to barge in and do anything related to my life."

"I do have a right, actually," Rose argued loudly.

"Being my sister gives you nothing. Nothing but a dying father, a ghost mother, and a pissed off brother who really regrets picking you up off that island."

Rose gasped and her face paled. Hiccup could see her trying to find words to say, but no sound would come out. She scoffed and shook her head, her mouth twisted and contorted. "I gave you that bond. I saved Astrid's life â€" "

"And you threw it away. You threw it away. And you know what I find really interesting? You saved Astrid's life. You gave us bonds that make us stronger so we can suffer longer in this cruel fucking world and yet Dad lies here dying."

Rose shook her head, her eyes bloodshot. "What are you talking about?" she asked hoarsely, barely above a whisper.

Hiccup gestured to Stoick. "If you could save Astrid from Outcast Orchid â€" a poison that has always been fully fatal â€" why won't

you do the same courtesy for him?"

Rose threw her hands up, her voice raising in pitch. "It doesn't work that way, if I could offer Stoick that, I would â€œ"

"It's just dragon blood and dragon venom," Hiccup argued. "Willfully given, and I know it won't be hard for us to do â€œ"

"It doesn't work that way!" Rose repeated. "You think I haven't considered it?! Stoick doesn't even know that I am his daughter, for Odin's sake! I never had a chance to tell him!"

"By this rate, I don't even know," Hiccup growled. "This could all be another one of your lies and I would never know it."

Rose went still. She took in a shaky breath through her nose, her jaw clenched so tight it would break dragon scales. She stared daggers into his heart and he blinked, a lump forming in his throat, a shot of cold rising in his chest.

"Mum always told me that you would amount to more than a hiccup," she said sharply through gritted teeth. "And I guess she was right. Although I don't think in the way she would have wanted."

Hiccup caught his breath. Those words, the same words his mother had written on his scroll revealing he could pick his own bride all those moons ago. He had never told anyone the words on that scroll. "Rose â€œ"

"I have done thousands of things that I am not proud of," Rose explained loudly, cutting Hiccup off. "All my mother and I wanted to do was to go back home, to be with our family even though they stopped fighting for us. And I never held that against you or Stoick. I never once brought myself to hate you two after all the years of beatings, rape, torture â€œ never did I lie there thinking about how you had left me to that fate. I never once killed someone and thought that it would upset you. I never stopped hoping. But after all the bad and horrible things I went through and did, I never thought that I would return home to this."

Hiccup pursed his lips and averted his eyes to the ground. Rose stared at him, her jaw tightening. She gulped loudly.

"I would have warned you if I knew of their alliance; if I knew that Alvin and Dagur had gone into this together. Instead, I bonded you to prepare you for the time when the Outcasts came back â€œ which was inevitable the moment I knew you were getting married, otherwise Alvin wouldn't have risked sending me unless it was to gain an inside view â€œ and I bonded Astrid when I realized that she was on death's door. I did those things for you. For your family. The family you are clearly not open to sharing."

Hiccup felt his shoulders sink slightly. "You tore my family apart."

"No," Rose rasped. "I didn't bite Dad. A dragon did. I didn't take your wife away. Alvin did. And yes, I stand by my decision in not telling you. The moment that Alvin found out there was a funeral â€œ Astrid's funeral â€œ he gathered everyone into the arena. The floor was still wet with dragon and human blood, and he made us stand there

and listen to him. And you know what he said? He said that you were dead. And it devastated our mother and it devastated me. But that is the only advantage Alvin has."

"But that isn't an advantage," Hiccup replied, "because I'm not actually dead."

Rose cracked a sour grin, a single tear falling onto a raised cheek.

"You're finally getting it," she said quietly, her tone razor sharp like the knife that she had cut Hiccup with moons before. "And so long as he thinks that, Astrid is just another one of his prized hostages. He has no reason to kill her. But the moment that he finds out that you're alive and that you and Astrid are remotely involvedâ€| she's dead. For now, let him think he's won."

Hiccup looked at the floor and let the words wash through him. "But I'm soâ€|"

"Angry?" Rose finished. "Frustrated? Hurt? Struggling to keep your head above the tide? Welcome to it. But don't forget that you are not the only one with a ghost mother and dying father. I just happen to be in the same boat."

Rose marched out of the room, shouldering past Hiccup and hauling the door open. Hiccup turned to follow her, but he stopped himself. He cursed under his breath and looked at Stoick, the lump in his throat nearly choking him, conflict crawling under his skin.

28. Loudmouth

Hello, everyone! Thank you for your patience these days. And thank you to those you are new to the story, especially to those who have joined in by reading the story in one sitting and taking the extra time to review! It means a lot to me.

* * *

><p>Chapter Twenty-Eight: Loudmouth

She was too weak. Another week â€" another day â€" of this, and she'd be dead, she knew it. She was staring at her arm, her nose wrinkled and her eyes too dry to cry. Yellowed flesh translucent around the edges oozed a pinkish pus that made her swallow. Some days, the sight of the wound made her hungry, others it made her wonder how she had stayed alive this long. Dagur had kept some of his word in letting her find the plants to help ease the infection, but she was restricted to using the plants they grew underground, and those were next to useless.

Ruffnut groaned and clenched her fingers. Her fingertips were numbing and her whole arm felt three times too heavy. And there were no clean bandages, so the wrappings Astrid had given her weeks before had to be reused over and over again. She'd be lucky to wash them, and her luck ran out the moment Dagur dragged her to his chambers for the first time.

She shuddered as another wave of cold shot through her, and she

gulped painfully. She wanted death to come, she felt it should have long ago. But not yet, for some awful reason.

Taking the wrap in her good hand, and putting the other end between her teeth, she wrapped her arm once more. She did so as tight as she possibly could, to feel whole once again. As she tied them, a thought came crawling into her mind, seeping like sludge squished in a fist. She could take the wrapsâ€¦ she could take the wraps from her armâ€¦ and maybe wrap them around her neck.

She paused and thought about it. No more nights of Dagur. No more days of her arm rotting away. No more wondering whether or not she'd ever make it out. She could, right now, escape. Permanently. But that meant no more Tuffnut, and no chance to ever see him again. She couldn't do that to him. But maybe he'd understand if she did. She didn't know. She never knew. Stupid, stupid Ruffnut, she thought to herself. Slowly rotting away in a hell hole of a place.

The door opened suddenly, making her jump and gulp. Dagur's bodyguard, Stench, lumbered in as Ruffnut struggled to her feet.

"Come with me," he demanded. Regardless, he grabbed her arm and pulled her out of her cell. She hissed as he dug his fingers into her bandages. She choked back a curse and a cry and let him drag her. If she fought back, she'd get a fist in the gut. But never the face, Dagur would always say. He'd want to keep that pretty.

Stench's job was always to bring Ruffnut from her cell in the western hall to Dagur, who stayed in a western chamber, tucked away in a dark corner. And they began to make their way towards his chambers, and Ruffnut groaned and felt bile rise in her throat. She didn't notice herself slump against Stench's frame until he elbowed her away roughly. She grunted and tried to right herself, but instead found herself hurling against the wall.

"Oh, for Odin's sake," Stench growled as Ruffnut wretched. She spat the remaining vomit from her mouth and wiped her mouth with a shaking hand. "It's a wonder you haven't died yet."

He wrapped a heavy hand around her waist and straightened her.

"Don't be doing that in front of Alvin, miss. He wouldn't fancy that."

"Alvin?" Ruffnut rasped.

She limped onward, Stench's hand moving to the back of her neck to keep her somewhat on her feet. They didn't make the final turn to Dagur's chamber after all, but turned down the main hall towards the conference room. Another cold feeling seeping up her chest, and Ruffnut wrapped her arms around herself. Stench opened the door and gave her a small shove into the room. She stumbled forward and almost lost her footing, but managed to steady herself as she looked up at Alvin.

Alvin glared at her from his throne made of hardened Sun Sap, his hands balled into fists and his face red. Dagur stood behind him, his eyes full of rage and on the floor, his lips pursed so hard, Ruffnut

thought they would shatter. The situation looked far from good.

Next to her in the centre of the room was the woman that had sorted them when Astrid and Ruffnut last saw each other.

"Birdsong," Alvin growled. "Where is the other dragon rider? I explicitly requested that both be brought before me."

Ruffnut peered over at Birdsong, wondering.

Birdsong looked exhausted. Her hands were wrapped in bandages from the Hatch, her eyes and cheeks were sunken, and her hair hung behind her head in multiple braids down to her hips. She bowed her head to Alvin.

"She was hit by one of Stargazer's darts a moon ago," she replied, "and she has not awoken yet, however we are confident she will be awake and working within the next week or so."

Alvin gawked at her. "_What_?"

"She is not able to come to your meeting so I come in her place as the leader of her faction," Birdsong stated again. Her tone was so clear, so monotonous, that Alvin was torn on whether to scream at her, or move on with the matter. He went with the latter.

"Wellâ€| I suppose we may as well start," Alvin grumbled. Birdsong nodded and glance over to Ruffnut, noticing the seeping bandages and the infection-riddled body before her with a wrinkled nose. "I'm glad you're here Birdsong â€""

"I bet," Dagur spat under his breath.

" â€" because this matter may as well involve you either way. And Dagur, hold your tongue!"

"Whatever, get on with it."

Alvin growled again. "I'll deal with you later."

There was a tense moment of silence before Alvin returned his attention to Ruffnut.

"You. You are going to tell me the truth."

Ruffnut didn't move, she didn't even blink. She was at a loss for what to do.

"There was a wedding," Alvin grunted. "A big one, one between Hiccup and another dragon rider. And you see, in this long moon of building and fortifying and digging, I realized something. There are only two female dragon ridersâ€| and I happen to have both of them."

Ruffnut shifted uncomfortably.

Birdsong cleared her throat. "You think one of the dragon riders we captured is the widow to Hiccup?"

"I _know_ it," Alvin replied. "Our source at the event told us there was a ceremony, and the Night Fury and her own dragon were at the

head of that ceremony. Now, I don't know about you, but it makes too much sense to me to let it slide."

"And if it is true?" Birdsong asked.

Alvin glared at Ruffnut again. "I can't have another rebellion on my hands. If the widow to Hiccup is under my roof and people find out, they will flock to her. And if Stoick is killed any time soon, assuming he hasn't been already, then we have the heir to Berk among their own people."

"Why does that matter?" she retorted. "If you indeed have the heir to Berk, isn't that an advantage? We'd have leverage against Berk, against Stoick if he survived the attack."

He slammed his fist against his throne. A crack squealed through the arm of his Sun Sap throne underneath his large and grizzled fist. Birdsong jumped and sucked a breath into her body, the air catching in a pocket in her throat. Ruffnut shrank back with nowhere to go. "Damn your leverage! I will not house, feed, and care for the daughter-in-law of my enemy!"

Birdsong shut her mouth and bowed her head. "I apologize, sir, I only wanted to understand."

"If you had kept your mouth shut, you would have understood regardless," Alvin spat. "We can't afford an uprising. It got too close on Outcast Island, no thanks to that traitorous bitch you felt so inclined to put to the task."

Birdsong clenched her jaw. "I had no inclination that Rose would betray our intentions upon her return â€“"

"Because you're a blind fool," Dagur seethed. Birdsong's lips parted in shock at Dagur's disrespect.

"Do you think I would willingly put our people in danger by promoting a rebellion?" she dared to ask.

"You're the one who decided to put a dragon rider in the Hatchery," Dagur yelled. He slinked from behind Alvin and descended the stairs. He snarled at Birdsong, almost hateful at her refusal to feel the fright he so desperately tried to instill within her stone-like heart. "Seems like you're setting up an advantage already."

Birdsong snorted and looked to Alvin. "I didn't know your little boy was all grown up, daring to insult his equal in front of his leader."

Alvin grunted, a smile tickling the corner of his chapped lips. Dagur gasped and his eyes flickered.

"Watch your mouth, Dagur. Your tongue belies your incomparable wit," Alvin butted in sarcastically. "If our people were to find out that you have been fraternizing with the heiress, there won't need to be a rebellion. It'll be a down right uprising, an outrage!"

"Why do you care who I sleep with?"

"Are you fucking deaf?" Alvin asked with an unamused look behind his

eyes. The room buzzed as Dagur scowled between the two of them. "Either the Hatchery matron or your whore are the reason why we can't hope of having peace in the Underground. If the people rebel, it puts them in harm's way. Now, I know most of 'our people' areâ€| hostages, as some would like to say, but they are our people now. That means we are responsible for their safety."

Birdsong nodded in agreement. "If word were to escapeâ€| it's too much of a risk."

"Which is why it is necessary to find her, hide her, deal with her, and destroy the evidence."

Dagur thrust his finger at Ruffnut, who flinched violently. "And what if it isn't her?! You're blindly relaying our concerns and plans in front of another Berkian?"

"I doubt she'll last the day, let alone another visit to your chamber," Birdsong replied. "Look at her, wallowing away slowly, wishing she were dead rather than lay eyes on your body one more time."

The words sank into Ruffnut's flesh slowly, working their way into her body one by one. Birdsong was right. She would rather die and be free than let Dagur touch her ever again. And Tuffnut would rather that, too. It was honourable. She could save herself, save Astrid. She knew that Astrid would be able to escape eventually. But either way, Ruffnut was dying today.

She stumbled forward slowly and let herself fall to a knee in front of Alvin, the weight of her pathetic life crushing her into the floor. Dagur and Birdsong stepped away from each other to watch, Dagur flicking his rage-filled eyes back to Birdsong.

"Pleaseâ€|" Ruffnut begged. "No more of this. I give up."

Saying the words out loud drew a sense of finality within her gut. The feeling of this being the end, of never turning backâ€| Silence echoed through the room as all eyes rested upon her shaking and frail frame. Her eyelids gently fluttered over her dry eyes, her head hanging heavily over the carved stone floor. It was as if she were already exposing her neck for the final chop. And she awaited with an open heart, hoping the blow would be swift.

"You're the wife of Hiccup?" Birdsong asked carefully.

"Widow," Ruffnut corrected, "and yes, I am. Surprised?"

"A little," Birdsong admitted. Alvin and Dagur shared a look between each other, eyebrows furrowed and raised all at once. "You'reâ€| not the most spectacular person I've laid eyes on."

"I thought it would be the other girl," Alvin noted suspiciously. "She was always there, I remember her, but youâ€| not so much."

"He initially wanted her," Ruffnut said, thinking through her words very, very carefully. "Butâ€| she was attacked long ago. Not long after the Red Death. Stoick refused to marry the pair because of the extent of the damage. You can see the scars if you want to take a look."

"Already have," Birdsong agreed. "She's telling the truth. The other girl is scarred beyond Berk's rules garnering marriage purity."

Dagur squinted at her. "Ah. But I attacked you. So that would be equally disqualifying."

"Luckily for me, you didn't give me any scars," Ruffnut responded with a daring shrug of the shoulder. "Wasn't a big deal."

"So you married Hiccup?" Birdsong asked again. "Because Stoick refused to marry him to the damaged Berkian?"

"After a month, yes. It's tradition on Berk to â€" "

Alvin waved a hand. "I know what your traditions are."

Ruffnut licked her lips and nodded. "Well, I suppose this worked out for the best."

Alvin raised an eyebrow and scoffed loudly. "Oh?"

Ruffnut glared. She couldn't help but grin. "Oh, yeah. You see, when you dragged me onto this pathetic excuse of a village, I somehow ended up locked in a cell in the darkest corners of the Underground, where this equally-pathetic excuse of a man raped me until I couldn't see straight. So no one saw me, no one knows whether or not I'm still alive, and those who wonder are few and far between: the other Berkian dragon rider and those in this room when you separated me from them. So I think you got off pretty lucky. Somehow."

Alvin cleared his throat, holding a hand up to Dagur to shut him up from another one of his retorts.

"Those are all very pretty excusesâ€| but it tells me nothing of whether or not you're telling the truth. So what can you tell me to make me believe that you actually married Hiccup?"

Ruffnut twisted her mouth, only taking a single second to think of her answer.

"Wellâ€| Dagur has nothing on Hiccup, let me tell you."

She raised her hands and gestured crudely, eluding to the size of a very specific body part. Alvin gawked and Birdsong paled as Dagur's cheeks became a deep crimson. Ruffnut let her hands fall and she sighed.

"Like I said, no scars were left over from that day, but on my wedding night? Women were not built for that sort of thing. I'm surprised I didn't get pregnant from holding his hand, too!"

Birdsong blinked rapidly and averted her gaze to Alvin, who tried desperately to contain himself as Dagur lunged for Ruffnut. Birdsong stepped in the way and shoved him back as Alvin broke into fits of guttural laughter.

"You dare insult me?!" Dagur shrieked, his voice cracking. His jet

black hair fell over his hooked nose and it quivered like a shaking leaf.

"I have nothing to lose when I do," Ruffnut spat at him. "I'll die either way and you'll lose me knowing how small of a man you really are!"

"Stop it, enough, all of you!" He looked to Ruffnut and contained himself, taking a deep breath as he looked upon her for a few moments. Dagur stared daggers into her soul and stepped away.

"Thatâ€¢ still doesn't tell me much."

"I just told you Berk's Best Kept Secret," Ruffnut argued loudly. "What more do you want? I'm the widow, I watched him die on my fucking bedroom floor because of you bastards!" She screamed for dramatic effect, and tears suddenly came rushing out of her eyes, angry and hateful. Flashes of Dagur slicing through Tuffnut slammed into her mind over and over, and she spat spittle with every lash of her tongue. "I watched him die! And I watched him burn! So go ahead, kill me! I want nothing more after what you murderers have done."

"Oh? You seem pretty eager to die," Alvin murmured, humoured by her temper-tantrum.

"Dying won't change anything. Anyone left on Berk will still come back. Dragons, men, women, and they will light this shithole on fire and watch the flesh fall off your bones as you beg for mercy like I have. And like you, we won't be dishing any out."

Anger rose in Alvin's chest, and Dagur laughed at what he thought was a ridiculous idea. "Birdsong, retrieve one of my men to deal with this whore."

Ruffnut jumped to her feet and Birdsong grabbed her sore arm, making her scream again. But she wouldn't shut her mouth. She never did, and never will, until the bitter end. "You may have killed Hiccup!" she shrieked. "But you never killed his Night Fury, and he will come and tear you apart until even the walls of Valhalla are painted in your blood!"

"Get her out of my sight!" Alvin demanded, standing from his throne. Ruffnut barely felt Birdsong wrap her lean arms around her famished waist. Her feet left the ground and she let Birdsong carry her out as she kept screaming.

"I'll be waiting for you, Dagur! I'll be waiting, and I'll watch the gods punish you for all eternity for what you've done to me! I'll be waiting!"

Dagur, framed in the doorway, blew Ruffnut a kiss. "I can't wait," he hissed. He slammed the door shut as Birdsong dragged her away into the darkness.

The moment the echo of the door's slam faded, Ruffnut's energy gave way. She stumbled to the ground, her hands searching for something to catch her. She coughed and hacked and tinted phlegm drooled onto the floor. She held her stomach and Birdsong grabbed her yet again.

"On your feet," Birdsong growled. Somehow, she planted Ruffnut back

on her sore feet and marched her onward. The path they took was one that Ruffnut had never been on â€“ but Ruffnut had not been down many in the Underground â€“ and this hallway was quietâ€| so quiet that Ruffnut could hear Birdsong breathe through her nose over the sound of her own ragged breaths. She didn't say anything to her executioner as they moved onward until it was almost impossible to see. They stopped for one moment.

"Stay still," Birdsong said gruffly. Ruffnut took the opportunity to slide down the wall onto her backside.

"It's not like I can run away, don't worry," Ruffnut said through a violent shiver.

She heard Birdsong fumble in the dark, and a flame was lit over a torch pulled from a bracket in the wall. Firelight stung her eyes for a moment. Birdsong placed the torch back in the bracket and dropped the flint tool back into her satchel. She sighed and cracked her neck, groaned, and opened her eyes to Ruffnut, who kept her head rested on the stone. She didn't look at Birdsong, but she looked at the roof, and noticed water dripping down the walls, not unlike the first cell she had been in with Astrid. She touched the wall over her shoulder weakly and felt the water dribble over her fingertips. Somehow, it made the idea of her impending murder a little softer.

"Soâ€| how are we doing this?" Ruffnut asked as Birdsong cracked her knuckles. "Are you gonna strangle me? Stab me? Throw me into a pile of diseased men?"

"Don't be ridiculous," Birdsong replied, only giving a single glance to Ruffnut. Ruffnut squinted at her as Birdsong crouched in front of her, peering into Ruffnut's face with an odd curiosity.

Ruffnut watched Birdsong's grey eyes search over her face. She lingered on her fair eyebrows, her cheekbones. She reached up and touched Ruffnut's jaw, running a finger down her neck slowly, and taking up a matted braid in her hand, Birdsong's searching gaze turned into a scrutinizing glare.

"You lied."

A cold rush of nausea spewed within Ruffnut's ribcage.
"What?"

"You're not Hiccup's widow."

"Yes I am," Ruffnut rumbled hoarsely. "I told you â€“"

"You said Stoick refused to marry the other Berkian to Hiccup," she murmured very quietly. "That's not what I wrote on the scroll."

Ruffnut furrowed her brow. "â€|Excuse me?"

"I said he could choose," Birdsong continued, "and it could be whoever he loved. And I am dead certain that even Stoick the Vast wouldn't go against my words. Not even he would be so foolish."

29. Valka's Plan

Happy Saturday! I hope everyone is well this weekend! Anyone else back in school? Once you hit a certain year in university, you kinda hit the ground running - hopefully, my juggling is as good as it used to be! Again, thank you to the newcomers for following this adventure, as well as the veterans who've stuck with me all along.

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><p>Chapter Twenty Nine: Valka's Plan

The hallway was quieter than a crypt as Birdsong watched Ruffnut squirm uncomfortably. She was supposed to die! She was supposed to confess a little lie " that she was Hiccup's widow " and then she would be put out of her misery. That was what was supposed to happen!

"You're Hiccup's mum," Ruffnut whispered. Birdsong nodded once, but instead of a lovely face that Stoick had so fondly remembered, she saw one of pain and starvation and hatred. "You're Valka."

"You've heard of me."

"Everyone on Berk has. We thought Alvin killed you!"

"He may as well have, but that's not important."

Valka stood and grabbed the torch quickly. She grabbed Ruffnut and helped her to her feet. "Wait, what are you doing?"

"Come!" she quipped. She tugged on Ruffnut's arm and led her deeper down the hallway. The floor began to ascend upwards and water coated the ground. It made Ruffnut slip a couple times, but Valka held her upright.

"You're not going to kill me?" Ruffnut asked as Valka quickened her pace.

"Don't sound so disappointed."

"Then where are we going? I'm going to die anyway, I want to die."

"You're going to die as we all do, but not today. At least, I certainly hope not. I would hate to see this opportunity go to waste. Hurry up."

They ran down the hallway as it grew even smaller and smaller, and the women had to shimmy sideways to squeeze through the tiny crevice. Ruffnut held her breath as she squeezed through the tiny space, almost sure she wouldn't make it through.

"I will make sure no one is patrolling the hall," Valka informed quickly. The back of Ruffnut's head and the tip of her nose were both touching the stony walls, so moving was out of the question. She heard the sound of metal scraping against stone and Valka squeezed out of the wall. Ruffnut waited a moment and could only hear the

sounds of her own breath. "We don't have much time. I don't want anyone to find out this hallway isn't in face a dead end."

A hand closed over Ruffnut's wrist and Valka pulled her through. Ruffnut gasped and stumbled into the open space. Valka quickly placed a huge shield back over the crack in the wall. She pulled the pair of them against the wall of a much larger corridor lit faintly by more torches. Valka looked both ways and pulled the dagger from her hip. Ruffnut tensed.

"What are you doing?"

"Shut it, you're supposed to be dead," Valka grunted as she ran the dagger across her own wrist in one quick motion. She gasped sharply through gritted teeth as blood spilled over her palm and down her fingertips. She cupped her hand and slapped it over Ruffnut's neck sloppily. She wiped the remainder onto her face. Ruffnut squirmed and tried to keep her lips and eyes shut and Valka grabbed her own forearm. She squeezed and urged another thick stream to flow freely over Ruffnut's neck and down her breasts. Then, she took the dagger and cut holes into Ruffnut's shirt, followed by another smear of blood here and there.

Valka cursed and looked at her wrist, but didn't make a move to cover it. She winced at the pain but proceeded to grab Ruffnut's hair and hack at it with her blade, letting the braids fall over an arm so they wouldn't be left on the ground. And whenever Ruffnut groaned and slumped, Valka would right her again with a gentle yet firm hand.

"Who goes?" a voice bellowed from the end of the hall. Ruffnut snapped her head towards the sound and Valka hissed through her nose. She pulled Ruffnut behind her as one of Dagur's soldiers emerged from the shadows. He had sharp features, blonde hair, and the arrogant attitude of what Valka assumed was part of him being around twenty summers old. "What the hell? What are you doing, Birdsong?"

"Executing a Berkian upon Alvin's request," Valka growled in reply using a tone that threatened him if he didn't turn away.

"In the central hall?"

"Wherever I saw fit," Valka replied. "Now leave us."

"But aren't executions meant to be held in the Pit?" the soldier asked, placing a hand on the hilt of his sword. He pulled the blade out and pointed it loosely between the two of them. "This looks awfully suspicious, wouldn't you say?"

"Alvin doesn't want this one to be seen. In fact, he wants no one knowing about this."

"But I do," the soldier sneered, stepping closer to the two women. "So I guess that means â€""

Valka shoved Ruffnut back, leaping forward and driving one of her boots into the gut of the soldier. He groaned and stumbled as Valka grabbed his head with one of his hands and smashed it into the stone wall. The man began to slump against the wall before Valka grabbed a

fistful of his curly blonde hair and wrenched his head up.

"Don't scream," Valka demanded Ruffnut quickly. Ruffnut barely reacted before Valka sliced the soldier's throat open, pulling on his hair more and more. Blood burst forth like a stormy wave hitting one of Berk's beacon towers. It sprayed all over Ruffnut's face and neck, running down her body. She jumped and horror slammed into her with every spattering of blood that touched and soaked her clothes. Valka let the man crumple to the floor and she rushed to Ruffnut. With wet hands, she washed Ruffnut's sheared head with the crimson life force to mask the colour of her hair.

"Oh gods, oh gods, why?" Ruffnut sputtered, her body shaking and alive with sickened adrenaline. Valka grabbed Ruffnut's face and gave it a shake.

"I need you to trust me child," she said quickly. "And sometimes we need to do terrible things for the greater good. I have waited fourteen \u00a4 maybe fifteen \u00a4 years for this moment, and we cannot \u00a4 we _cannot_ \u00a4 fail."

She grabbed her arm and slung it over her shoulder.

"Limp on me, keep your face down."

Ruffnut followed the orders as well as she could, even in the state she was in. She dragged the two of them as fast as possible down the central hall. Luckily, no one wandered the halls for most of the journey, but they would run into a patrol sooner or later.

"What is this?" a soldier asked. "Birdsong, are you injured? Who is this?"

Ruffnut was almost completely limp, and Valka readjusted her weight over herself the best she could. "I was in the central hall on my way to the Pit for one of Alvin's executions," she cried shrilly, "but she grabbed a hold of my knife, and she attacked one of our own!"

"What?!"

"Aye, down the hall. I don't think he's alive, but one of my Hatch girls got involved in the fray when she heard the scuffle and I must bring her to Stargazer immediately."

"And the assailant?" another soldier asked frantically.

"Dead. I chased her down and cornered her. She lost her footing and fell into a pit of Sun Sap, thank the gods!"

"Do you need help to Stargazer? We should help. Jorn, assist \u00a4 "

"No, you must get to your man down the hall. You know how I am with my girls, I can handle her. He needs your help more than I, and we need that mess cleaned up before any prisoners see it and wonder. Alvin was very clear. He wants no evidence. Understand?"

Ruffnut heard the soldiers run off, barking phrases to one another as their voices eventually faded. Valka continued into the Hatchery,

grunting with the weight of Ruffnut's body. But the truth was Ruffnut's body was failing, and time was running out. It was no longer and act.

Valka growled and kicked the door open to Stargazer's chamber. They flew inside and Valka dropped Ruffnut to the floor to lock the door.

"Stargazer?" she called before she realized the room was empty save for Astrid's frail body sleeping in one of the two beds. "Shit."

She moved on without help from Stargazer and almost turned the empty bed over to grab at the bag of medical supplies. Behind it was a small chest that she seized and shoved across the floor. She raced back over to Ruffnut as she struggled to sit up.

"Drink some water, we don't have much time," she muttered urgently, dropping her waterskin into her lap. Ruffnut pulled the cork and drank from it as Valka opened the bag. She pulled various vials free and peered into them. She made a choice before pulling her knife out once more to cut Ruffnut's bandages away.

Ruffnut stopped drinking and watched as the bandages sloughed from her dirty wound. Valka made a distressed noise in her nose and gulp as her hands hovered over the gash. But she grabbed the vial and opened it. She lifted Ruffnut's discoloured and swollen arm up and hovered the vial over her arm. The contents were thick and congealed, a yellow-gray colour.

"Fireworm dragon milk," Valka informed. "Burns like hell, but it keeps the babies alive and healthy until their skin is thick enough to bear the heat of their own home."

The contents sloped out and fell directly into the gash, and Ruffnut immediately gasped. She seized and tensed and a scream choked within her throat. Some sound escaped as Valka used her nimble fingers to rub the milk into the necrotic tissue, pulling the chunks of dead skin free as it was burned from the healthy flesh.

"The good news is that your arm healed around the bone, but the muscles will never be the same. The milk will help with healing, and this poultice I'm about to give you will keep the infection away and keep your bandages from rotting."

She grabbed a jar and poured some of the herbs and medicinal plants into her palm before mixing it with the rest of the milk. She pressed it into both sides of the wound before quickly wrapping it with a fresh bandage as Ruffnut groaned from the intense pain. She opened her eyes and they widened. She tried to stand as she reached out to Astrid. Valka stopped her.

"She's fine."

"She looks like she's starving!" Ruffnut said. "You said she was hit by a dart? Why didn't she wake up? How long has she been asleep?"

"A moon. It's been a moon, child," Valka replied strongly. "But you cannot worry about her now. I will protect her and you will protect you."

"I need to see her. I need 'em' I need 'em'"

She crawled over the best she could, and Valka let her. She watched expressionless as Ruffnut pulled the blankets back slightly to grab Astrid's hand. She gave it a squeeze.

"She'sâ€¢ she's bone-thin," Ruffnut whimpered. Astrid's wrist bones jutted out and Astrid hand lay limp within hers. Somehow, it was frailer, and Ruffnut was the sicker of the two. Or so she thought.

"We've been force-feeding her," Valka said calmly. "Bread and milk, three times a day. But it's not enough. She will wake, though. She's becoming more and more restless as the days drag on."

Ruffnut was not convinced.

"Why are you helping me?" she asked, huffing back a sob. Valka faltered and grew still. She thought for one moment before looking up and sucking on a cheek in thought.

"It's not just you," she began tersely. "I'm helping myself. I'm helping your friend. I'm hoping to help all of those who have been dragged here against their will. Butâ€¢ something like that takes time. It takes sacrifice."

Ruffnut turned and looked up to Valka.

"You've been here? This whole time? And you haven't tried to escape?"

"Oh, I've tried," Valka argued. "Many times in the beginning. But then there was a time when it was safer for meâ€¢ to try to accept my fate rather than fight it. I found that it would be better to protect and fight from the inside. Although I've never had a chance until now."

Ruffnut's face contorted as sorrow filled her body. "And why am I different? Why did you spare me?"

Valka smiled tightly. "Because my son taught you how to ride a dragon. Because of that, you have a chance. When you put your neck on the line to protect your friendâ€¢ well, Alvin is never expecting to see you again, and he never will. At least until the time is right."

"Wait, what?"

Valka kneeled to Ruffnut's level and pulled her hand from Astrid's. "I know, in my heart, that Berk has not fallen. The houses may be gone. The Great Hall could be gutted. Butâ€¢ Stoick? He's been trapped in halls of dragon flame and he has walked out of them as if nothing can touch him. I know my husband, and I know how he leads. And I also know Alvin. He left thinking he had no one else to fight while I knew about the tunnels underneath the village. People are still alive out there?"

The room grew silent as Ruffnut looked into Valka's hopeful eyes. And she could tell this was no trick, no joke. She could see the memories behind Valka's eyes.

"Iâ€| I don't knowâ€| But I know Stoick used the tunnel. My brotherâ€| my twin had been wounded and he flew away. I hope he survived butâ€| "

Valka winced. "I know your pain. Not knowing whether or not someone you love so dear is still aliveâ€| but believe me. Knowing does not make it any easier."

She turned away and grabbed the chest as a hot gush of realization ran up Ruffnut back like a dragon's tongue.

"When I heard about the funeralâ€| when I found out that the poisonâ€| "

Valka's voice caught, and a frail squeak whistled past her lips as Ruffnut's mouth fell open.

"I've seen that poison work on grown men and I didn't find out that Alvin had planted it on Berk until it was too lateâ€| and the idea of not being able to rush there to save my baby before heâ€| it's a pain I don't wish upon anyone. Not even Alvin, not even after the people he's taken from me."

"Valkaâ€|" Ruffnut began before she realised she didn't yet have the words.

"Don't pity me," Valka said quickly. "I am only telling you this because you need a story to tell."

She sat on Astrid's bed beside her legs and peered down at Astrid with a loving and depressed shine in her eyes.

"I knewâ€| it would be Astrid," Valka continued, sniffing loudly and brushing a tear away from her eye. "I meanâ€| I didn't actually know but I had a feeling. That's whyâ€| I took her into the Hatch. And I have her here under my care, right where I want her. I'm so sorry that I didn't choose you for a safer place."

"I have a feeling there's little you can do with Dagur," Ruffnut mumbled, still shocked at her revelation.

"And a lot he can do to you," Valka spat.

Ruffnut bit her lip and watched Valka watch Astrid.

"She's all I have left, nowâ€| Everyone else I had hope of seeing again is gone. Either dead orâ€| we don't know."

"Yeeeahâ€|" Ruffnut sighed. "The poison was a dick move on Alvin's part, for sure."

Valka wrinkled her brow. "How colloquial of you," she said, unamused.

"They're going to crap their pants when they find out that Hiccup's not dead."

She carefully looked up at Valka, whose face had gone completely pale and lifeless. Her eyes were stagnant and wider than wide. Her throat

twitched as she tried to make a sound. But a feather falling to the floor would break the silence that formed around the women, suffocating. Valka stumbled off the bed and frantically grabbed Ruffnut's hands, huge tears forming in her eyes.

"What?"

Ruffnut nodded ever so slightly and Valka's cheeks began to flush. "Hiccup didn't touch the poison, Astrid did."

Confusion masked Valka's stricken face. "What? Astrid is alive, no one has survived Outcast Orchid."

"The poison almost killed her, butâ€| I don't remember the whole explanation of what happenedâ€|"

"But Hiccup â€" my Hiccup â€" is still alive?" Valka pressed, her voice barely about a whisper.

Ruffnut nodded again. "Well, I think soâ€| he led the defense while Stoick led those who fled. We didn't want him to, some people explained that it would be better for him to hide and let everyone believe it was his funeralâ€| but it was Astrid's."

"Butâ€| I don't understand."

Ruffnut, frustrated, threw a hand up. "I don't know! There was this girl he found on Outcast Island after it had been burned and when Astrid was poisoned, she justâ€| I dunno, fixed her with some dragon voodoo magic shit and poof! Astrid shows up on Berk after we watched her boat burn away into the sunset and the next evening, Alvin was on our doorstep and â€" ow, you're â€" you're kinda crushing my hands."

Valka pulled away like a snake and slapped her hands over her mouth. Ruffnut backed away slowly. Valka staggered to her feet and looked around as if there was something to see as she began jumping in place. Ruffnut furrowed her brow as Valka screamed into her hands and broke into sobs.

"Uhh â€""

Valka snatched Ruffnut and pulled her into a bone-crushing embrace, sobs whistling out of her body like a hurricane smashing into a cliff-face. She pulled away and grabbed Ruffnut's face.

"Rose!" she squealed. "He found Rose?!"

"I think?"

"Small girl, pale, red hair and big, bright, green eyes, with terrible scars all over her body?"

"I didn't know her that well."

"She talked to dragons," Valka stated, trying to compose herself. "She could speak to them."

Ruffnut paused and pondered. "Waitâ€| who's Rose to you?"

"I sent her to the wedding to get information for our plans, maybe to get word out to Berk about our existenceâ€| I can't believe I didn't believe her! When I was captured, I was pregnant. Rose is â€""

"Holy Odin and Thor, Rose is Hiccup's sister," Ruffnut breathed. "That's why she was so clingy with him. I thought it was because he saved her."

"Tell me more, I must know."

Ruffnut nodded and licked her lips. "Wellâ€| we were patrolling, trying to figure out why the Outcasts were so quietâ€| and Hiccup left the group. He flew to Outcast Island and found her in the debris. He brought her back and then eventually, Astrid ate the poison. Rose did this thing to Hiccup after the wedding that she ended up doing to Astrid where sheâ€| likeâ€| bonded?"

"She actually did it," Valka whispered gleefully. "She bonded the two of them to their dragons. That's why Astrid is still alive! That dart should have killed her and yet she sleeps. And when she was attacked by the dragon, she spoke to it! Iâ€| I â€" I can't help but feel this is all a dream. My Rose. My Hiccup. My babies were dead this morning and they're alive this afternoon."

Valka sat back, absolutely exhausted and elated all at once, her face drenched in tears and smears of blood. She grinned and grabbed the small chest once more and thrust it into Ruffnut's hands. "It seems the gods are on our side today. Within are some medicines you may need. Anything else is too dangerous."

"What? For what?"

"Oh, dear girl, after the news you've brought me today? Someone has to get to my family and tell them what's going on. After losing them once, I am not going to sit here for another fifteen years wondering if I'll ever see them again."

Ruffnut gasped. "What?!"

"Well, what else do you want?" Valka asked as she pulled a barrel from the corner of the room. "Alvin thinks you're dead. Cutting your hair and giving you a blood shower won't keep you safe here forever, and I don't really want to kill you."

"But how? How the hell are you supposed to get me out of the Underground?"

Valka tapped the barrel with her fingers. Ruffnut gawked at her.

"Are you serious?"

"Do you have a better idea?"

Ruffnut looked at the large barrel and groaned. "â€|No."

* * *

><p>Fitting into the barrel comfortably was an effort best forgotten, Ruffnut soon found out. Breathing and rolling around without hurling

took all her concentration as Valka pushed the barrel on its side down the hall. Ruffnut held her breath for as long as she could between breaths. Over and over she rolled, fermenting in her own rotten smell, as Valka pushed her way through patrols without notice. If anyone asked Valka about it, Valka would respond by saying it was to trade for goods for the Hatchery. No one asked questions twice.<p>

Valka, meanwhile, pushed onward with a wrinkle in her brow and a sweat forming over her cheeks. The fates had been too kind so far; besides the news that both of her children were alive, the traders were all in the Bay Port, a tiny bay filled with slapdash and rickety docks primarily used to keep their fleet of ships hidden, but also for traders to dock. Since the Battle of Berk, the traders had fewer places to go. No one traveled to Berk or its allies. Valka knew of one who could probably make a side-trip here or there.

Meanwhile, she took a deep breath of the salty air. The only time she could even have a hint of fresh, untainted air was in the Bay Port. It smelled wonderful, even with the lurking smell of the Underground clinging to her clothes. And if she tried hard enough, she could maybe catch a glimpse of the stormy ocean outside, but only for a moment.

"Halt," a Berserker soldier said as she rolled the barrel over the docks. He had a scroll of parchment in his hands with a stump of charcoal. Valka doubted he could even read. "State your purpose, Birdsong."

"I have goods to trade for items in the Hatch," she said simply, wiping her face dry.

"What goods do you have?"

"Same as the usual. Some scales, some bones, some milk and venom."

The soldier nodded to her as he scribbled his nonsense onto his scroll. "And the trader?"

"Johann," Valka stated clearly.

The soldier looked up with a kink in his brow. "Johann? What do you want with that milk-drinker?"

"I already told you," Valka repeated, annoyed. "For items we need in the Hatch. Johann happened to bring me some Berkian wares after the battle and I am merely repaying him with what I have to offer."

"Ah. You have some sort of agreement with him, then?"

"Ah! Birdy Birdy Birdsong!" trader Johann called from the end of the dock. The soldier grunted and turned, and Birdsong relaxed. "Hi, how are yah?" he asked the soldier, too quick for a response. "Seems you've got a rather appealing barrel on your hands! Any chance it may be coming my way?"

Valka smiled, ignoring the soldier who was bustling about along the dock awkwardly, as if he walked in on something. "Yes, a barrel full of wonderful wares and treats for your journeys, as promised

long ago."

"Better late than never, my love!" Johann quipped happily. "The other ports simply adore your dragon wares, especially since they can no longer get them from Berk. Pity, but hey! Business is business, and I always find it!"

He grabbed the barrel from her hands and rolled it closer to him. "Heavy, heavy, heavy! I like heavy! Alright, Birdy, I'm sure this will do."

The soldier cleared his throat and raised one of his bushy eyebrows. "I should check it before you go."

"No need, goodâ€| sir!" Johann said, assuring. "Birdy and I go waaaay back, back to when Alvin first introduced her to meâ€| ten years ago? Was it ten years? I hardly remember. It seems like longer. Like, I'm almost positive that in a past life, we knew each other!"

"Past lives," the soldier spat. "You're one of those fellows."

"Charming, inquisitive, funny? Good with a ship? I guess you're right," Johann replied with a sigh and a wink. "Besides, I've gotta run â€" I mean, sail â€" away into the sunset before the wind dies down, and I think we can all agree that no one wants me prattling away with you overnight!"

He rolled the barrel away, peeking over his shoulder to Valka and the soldier, who was more flustered and disturbed than he was annoyed.

"I'll see you soon, my little Birdy!" Johann called. Valka smiled and gave him a formal nod, suppressing her sadness as the only symbol of freedom she knew pushed the barrel onto the deck of his boat. She waited and watched as Johann raised his anchor and lowered his sail to catch the Bay Port wind, bobbling away until he left he sight around the stony corner, taking Ruffnut away with him.

* * *

><p>In the baths, Valka washed her forearms clean of blood. She was naked and alone, the sound of water droplets hitting the warm the only sound. To get the blood out of her three braids was a feat and a half, but a step necessary. She hated the feeling of crusty hair on the back of her neck, and she let her hair flow through the water's gentle current while she looked at her wrist with a wrinkled nose.<p>

The cut was clean and red, so infection would be easily preventable. But her eyes trailed up her arm to the other milky white scars that crossed over her wrist; over the scars that gouged her pale skin. She lifted her other wrist to compare and upon the other wrist were fresh wounds she'd inflicted upon herself moons before. She ran her fingers over the scabbing lines, tickling the nerves that hadn't been damaged.

In the fifteen years she had stayed among the Outcasts, she had tried to take her life four times. Once after the first night Alvin imprisoned her. Once after the last time she saw Rose, bloodied and

beaten in the impenetrable cell after her betrayal, left behind as Alvin forced her to sail away to the Underground. And twice after finding out Hiccup had been poisoned and murdered.

She had always wondered why the gods refused her. She thought about it as she stared at her arms, soft questions washing through her as she asked herself those questions that plagued her after every failed attempt.

She had the answer. And the answer always was her children. She lived after the first night because of Rose, suspended inside of her as a tiny fetus. She lived after thinking Rose had burned because Rose never really died. And neither did Hiccup. So if she cut her life short, she wouldn't have had a chance of seeing them again. She did now, even though the journey seemed impossible. She grabbed a bandage she had left by the edge of the baths and tied it around the fresh cut tightly.

Valka grabbed her hair and wrapped it over her shoulder and around her neck to keep it from getting in her way as she pulled herself out of the baths and to her bundle of clean clothes. She slapped the water away from her skin. Over scars and bruises and scabs and burns, the water droplets flew away and onto the floor before she pulled on her shirt. She pulled her trousers over her legs and wrung out her hair.

Combing her fingers through her long, brown hair, Valka separated it and braided it in Berk fashion: a four-piece braid. She always did three braids. Stoick loved her hair like that.

"Birdsong," a voice called formally from the hall. Valka swallowed and clenched her jaw, but her fingers kept braiding smoothly and quickly.

"You found me," she mused with a sarcastic smile. She didn't look up as Stench bumbled into the bathroom cautiously. He obviously didn't want to intrude on Birdsong while she bathed, and Valka always found that amusing. She knew Stench had an unusual etiquette about him when talking to her, and it humoured Valka because Stench looked far from gentle, and yet his heart seemed to have a smidgen of gentleness.

"Alvin sent me to retrieve you," Stench said. "He heard the task had a little hiccup."

Valka paused and her fingers slowed their work. "A hiccup, he said?"

"That the prisoner gave a fight," he clarified quickly.

"Ah. Yes, I suppose the girl was feisty," Valka sighed. She tied her hair off and stood, nodding to Stench. "But I assume he knows that the girl is also dead?"

Stench licked his lips. "Yeah. He knows. Still wants to see you, though."

Valka tilted her head slightly as she watched Stench look at his hands. He cleared his throat and looked back to Valka awkwardly. "She did not suffer, Stench," she said gently.

"Oh yes she did," Stench muttered. "But you didn't hear that from me. Come, Alvin's been waiting. He didn't think you'd go to the baths before seeing him."

"Of course he didn't."

Valka packed her old clothes in her satchel and buckled her belts back around her hip.

"Alvin's chamber? Or the main chamber?" she asked quietly.

"His personal chamber," Stench replied, just as quiet.

"Very well. You may go, Stench, I will take myself to Alvin."

Stench nodded and left immediately, knowing this choice was out of Valka's pride. And so she went, walking down the halls with a straight back and power in her stride. Along with Dagur, Alvin stayed in a dark and quiet corner of the western hall. Even though she had only been living in the Underground herself for about three moons, she knew the path to Alvin all too well. She didn't even knock before she opened door, and she stepped inside.

Alvin was waiting by the fire, pacing to and fro. He spun as Valka locked the door and faced him.

"I heard there was a fight," he said quickly, stopping his pace and vibrating with tension. His eyes were wide and he wrung his hands. "You were injured."

"Alvin, I â€“," Valka began, lifting her hand to calm him down.

"Your wrist, it's bleeding through the bandages!" he gasped, stepping towards her quickly. He grabbed her hand gingerly and turned it over. "I â€“ I have fresh ones, hold on a moment."

He rushed away, knocking over a sword and Valka's staff. He tripped over them and stumbled. But he caught himself and opened his chest of drawers and rummaged through them.

"Take off those old dressings," he grunted as he pulled out a fresh bundle. Valka hesitated, but knew that if anyone had the freshest, cleanest bandages in the Underground, it would be Alvin. So she bit her tongue and unwrapped her wrist. He returned to her and brought the bandage under her arm. He slowed his movements and carefully pulled the cotton over the wound, then wrapped it a tight as he could. He tried to tie it off, but his fingers were too large.

"It's alright," Valka reassured him, taking over and tucking the loose ends into the wrap. Alvin clasped her hands and held them as if he were holding a bird with a broken wing.

"Is she gone?"

"Aye," Valka replied. "I chased her down and she fell into the Sun Sap. Then my girl from the Hatch got involved and took the brunt of itâ€!"

"And the girl? Did she know?" Alvin pressed. "About her ties to Hiccup?"

"If she did, she won't speak of itâ€| her injuries were too grave."

"And the body?"

"I gave it to my connection in the Bay Port. He'll drop the barrel into the ocean after two days' time. No one will ever know there was a problem."

Alvin grinned and sighed. "Well done, my love. Everything is falling into place. Hiccup is dead. Stoick is defeated. And the widow has been destroyed."

He kissed Valka's wrist, and dragged his mouth up her arm, wrapping his other arm around her waist.

"Finally, things are finally playing out as they should," Alvin murmured against her bandage.

"Aye," Valka whispered as Alvin tightened his grip around her waist. "Finally, indeed."

30. Cauli's First Flight

Happy Friday, everybody! Thank you to those who are tuning in and who are reviewing their reaction to this story. Sorry for the delays; getting prepped for surgery on Tuesday and some other hiccups along the road is keeping me from writing as much as I would like. _

* * *

><p>Chapter Thirty: Cauli's First Flight

"Nope! No, no no no, and once again, nope!"

Hiccup's hands fell to his sides, a breath of air flying out of him with an agonizing groan.

Cauli stood across from him, her greatsword in her hands, her whole body ready to snap Hiccup in half with her blunt blade. Hiccup sighed and looked behind him to the Hangar full of wild dragons that wandered around, devoted to his cause since the battle. He motioned to them and frowned at Cauli hilariously.

"Are you serious?" he asked. "Fighting people, killing people, and yet you won't choose a dragon."

"Damn right I ain't choosing," Cauli spat. "I'm not touching a single one."

Hiccup rubbed his eyes. He had been working at this for hours, desperate to get her to at least touch one of them to see if it would change her mind. That, and it had been three weeks of asking her daily to at least try.

"You have to give them a chance. Who knows, you may fall in love with

one."

"I don't fall in love as easy as you," she sneered. "I'll have one of my hands chomped off and swallowed and I'll start looking like your freak uncle!"

"Gobber is not my uncle," Hiccup mumbled. "Look, it'll put us at an advantage if we can get more people on more dragons."

"But why me?!" Cauli complained.

"Maybe because you're a leader" and you getting on one will encourage your soldiers to trust me" and I have a weird sense of keeping things consistent, I don't know. In the past week, I've gotten Netmug on a Typhoomerang. Barb has a Scauldron. And you!"

Cauli growled and sniggered. "So what if I don't want to ride one? You can't make me!"

"What is your problem with dragons?"

Cauli raised her sword and wrinkled her nose. Her ratted hair was coming out of its knot and her cheeks were growing redder and redder. "They are devilish creatures with sharp teeth that can spit fire out of their mouths that can swallow you in one piece and I think NO THANK YOU!"

Hiccup blinked at her and let his hands fall to his sides. "These dragons are our allies. They have sworn themselves to our cause! They won't hurt you, they won't bite you, they won't even nip at you."

Cauli's eyes flicked to Hiccup's leg. "So your leg just fell off, then?"

"Odin help me," Hiccup muttered.

"You think I don't know that your pet" "

"Toothless" "

"gnawed your leg off and swallowed it?!"

"He didn't!" Hiccup countered. "He saved me by catching my leg! Yes, he used his teeth, and yes it broke it, and yes it was irreparable, but none of that matters."

"None of it matters?!" Cauli shrieked. "Did you not just hear yourself?!"

"If any of it matters, it's that Toothless saved my life, and that day is the only reason why the dragons are crazy enough to stand by us. Can you at least put the sword down? That's the first step."

"I'm not taking any steps, fuck off."

Hiccup's shoulders sank. He turned and walked away from her, muttering under his breath and running his fingers through his hair.

He looked across the Hangar and saw Barb's Cauldron take off to the ocean, while Changewings croaked to each other at the stormdoors. Stormfly bobbed her head at him, her damaged wing tied to her body. He looked away again and gave up.

"Fineâ€¢ we won't do this... I won't make you ride a dragon."

Cauli frowned again, unsure. Her sword didn't waver, but she did relax. "Good."

"And I'm not going to let you teach me how to fight."

Cauli's eye twitched again and her body tensed up. "Hey, no, that's not fair. You need to learn how to wield a blade, it's foolish not to."

Hiccup shrugged. "Sword are tools. We use them to help us kill. Just like how I use dragons to help me. So if you won't learn how to fly, I won't learn how to fight."

Cauli pursed her lips and looked at the dragons behind her.

"Please, Cauli. If we get you onto a dragon, you'll get me to fight. We both humiliate the other and we both get what we want."

The other leader rolled her eyes and jabbed her sword closer to Hiccup's unwavering chest. "Now we're back to arguing! I'm not going to do it!"

"It's been two moons!" Hiccup yelled, his patience breaking. "No, wait â€¢ more than two moons of arguing and negotiating and rebuilding and sacrificing and yet we are nowhere closer to what we want!"

"It's not like it's easy for me!" Cauli cried back. "Way up there, anything could happen!"

Hiccup was about to say something back when he stopped. He closed his mouth and furrowed his brow. Then, a sudden realization dawned on him, the feeling of warmth running up his back as he figured it all out.

"You're afraid of heights," he said with a smile tugging at his lips.

Cauli paled and she stepped back, adjusting the grip on her sword. "I never said that."

"You just did."

"I did not!"

"It's okay to be afraid," Hiccup reassured, holding his hands out. "I was, too. It's not that bad, though."

Cauli dropped her sword down and snatched Hiccup by the collar, sneering in his face and giving him a shake. "I am not afraid of heights, you tiny little poor excuse of a person."

Hiccup pouted. "Now you've upset me."

"Good."

Hiccup shook his head. "No. Not good. Not good at all."

He had been waiting hours to do this. He knew it wouldn't be easy to get Cauli's arse on a dragon, and he knew he'd have to do something drastic to keep her still long enough to do it. But Astrid had taught the Dragonlings much before she was captured, and much of that was defense, attack, using your surroundings to protect yourself, and being patient.

He shot his hand out, clapping it over Cauli's ear as fast as Toothless' flight. She grunted and wobbled to the side as Hiccup stepped around her, wrapping his arms around hers from behind and pulling them back. She squealed and Hiccup held on for dear life, desperately wrapping a leather strap around Cauli's wrist.

"Now!"

A Changewing waiting in one of the dragonling rooms right next to the pair had been camouflaged the whole time with Hiccup's unspoken request, and it darted out and slithered to the pair. Hiccup released Cauli and gave her rump a kick, and she stumbled right into the dragon, her voice shrill and shrieking and cursing. Hiccup threw the strap over the Changewing's body, where it secured Cauli's wrist to the dragon.

"Hold on!" he called. Cauli bore her gaze into Hiccup's soul, and she was furious.

"I will kill you if you â€""

The Changewing darted forward, running for the exit and launching itself into the air. Hiccup laughed and Toothless bounded over to him from the back of the building, scooping him up to chase the Changewing as it soared onward. They caught up quickly, and Hiccup looked over to see Cauli dangling off the side of the dragon. She was still screaming, and her legs kicked wildly. The Changewing grunted as her flight was bombarded by her rider's movement. Hiccup waved to her.

"Stop moving!" he said quickly.

"I'm gonna die, I'm gonna die! And then, I'm gonna kill you! Oh gods! I'm gonna â€""

"Cauli! It's okay, I'm here, you're okay!"

"I'M DANGLING OVER THE OCEAN, I AM NOT OKAY!"

"Let me help you up and into the saddle."

"DON'T YOU FUCKING TOUCH ME."

Hiccup frowned and cursed under his breath. She was too distraught. "Get me closer, bud," he murmured. Toothless reluctantly obliged, gliding towards Cauli's kicking legs. Hiccup ducked as one of her steel-clad boots soared towards his face. He reached down and cranked Toothless' tail open for solo gliding and unclipped his leg.

"Steady."

He crawled to his feet and reached up, grabbing the saddle from under the Changewing's belly. Cauli's face was red and covered in furious tears, and she clenched her teeth and hyperventilated through them like a kettle at boiling point.

"I am going to help you into the saddle," he repeated calmly. Cauli sniffled and sobbed, swallowing it down and replacing it with her usual anger once more. "It's okay to be scared."

"I shouldn't have trusted you," she cried. "This was mean, so unbelievably mean. And rude!"

Hiccup sighed and sucked on his lip for a second, feeling a small pang of guilt in his gut. She was scared, and she definitely didn't want to show it. "I'm sorry," he admitted. "But now you're in this. But I'm staying with you, okay?"

Cauli squeezed her eyes shut and she grunted. "Hiccup!"

"I know you're afraid of heights, and that's okay, too!"

Cauli's body sank a foot and she shrieked. Hiccup paled. "The strap!" she screamed.

"Don't struggle!" Hiccup ordered immediately. "Don't move!"

She wriggled around, trying to reach the saddle. Toothless groaned.
The strap is stretching, move Hiccup!

Hiccup clambered up the other side of the Changewing, quickly reaching over to Cauli. She looked up at him, her eyes wide and red and spilling over onto her cheeks. He reached his hand down and grabbed her wrist, keeping his grip firm.

"Just keep looking at me," he said. "I'm not going to let you fall, I promise."

Cauli didn't say anything. She shut her mouth and bit her tongue and reached up to grab Hiccup's hand with her other arm. She tried twice before finally gaining a grip on him. He heaved up with all his might and Cauli's torso made it over the saddle. He began to climb down the other side to use his weight against Cauli's until she shakily sat in the saddle. Hiccup found his feet on Toothless' saddle once more, where he sank into it safely. He uncranked his tail and regained control, flying next to Cauli, who still had her eyes shut.

"That wasn't so bad."

"I hate you!" Cauli cried, her voice strangled and riddled with squeaks. "I hate you!"

"You're doing great, trust me!"

"Never, I ain't ever trusting you again."

"You're lying and you know it," he scoffed. "You have to at least open your eyes. Then you can fly the Changewing back to the Hangar."

She didn't say anything; she sat in the saddle with her eyes squeezed shut tighter than a vice. Hiccup flew closer to her.

"The reins are right in front of you," he continued. "Reach forward slowly and you'll find them hooked around the saddlehorn."

Cauli cursed again and opened one of her eyes, snatching at the reins quickly. Hiccup reached out a hand to her to calm her again.

"Good. Now don't move too abruptly. You want to smoothly guide me."

Cauli heaved on them and the Changewing contorted and shrieked. It halted and Cauli froze. Hiccup slapped his forehead impatiently.

"Smoothly, Cauli!" he groaned. "It's okay just follow me."

He placed himself in front of the Changewing and called over the wind.

"You want to move with your dragon! Lean and follow me, and only use the reins to hold on for now."

He banked lightly, trying for a gentle circle. "Just follow me," he said quietly so only the Changewing could hear.

You owe me two baskets of fish AND a bundle of dragon-nip, Saviour.

"Fine," Hiccup sighed. "Let's just get her home."

* * *

><p>Hiccup made sure to avoid landing Toothless after the Changewing landed back in the Hangar. Cauli slumped off her back and stumbled away from the dragon. Looking a terrified shade of green, she wobbled towards the nearest wall. She grabbed it and groaned.</p>

"You alright down there?" Hiccup asked as he hovered above her.

She clapped a hand over her mouth. Hiccup frowned. Toothless landed and Hiccup unclipped himself. He cautiously approached her and he Changewing slinked next to him. Hiccup reached out and placed a caring hand on Cauli's shoulder. She was shaking, and uncontrollably. Hiccup urged her to sit down and eased her to the floor.

"Just feel the floor, ground yourself again."

Cauli took deeper breaths as she planted her palms on the ground. The Changewing crawled over to her and placed her head beneath Cauli's body as she shook. She held Cauli up off the ground and Cauli began to relax, draped over the dragon's head. She patted the dragon lightly as Hiccup rubbed her back soothingly.

"So you don't seem ready to tear my head off just yet," he said quickly, stifling a relieved laugh.

Cauli cracked a smile as she sucked in more air into her lungs. "I am never doing that again, I hope you realize that."

"Yeah, I don't believe you."

She shook her head again and pushed back. She waved the Changewing away, who looked at her longingly before stepping back. Cauli furrowed her brow. Hiccup chuckled and looked between Cauli and the dragon, a grin splitting across his face.

"It's looking at me," she said.

"She likes you," he replied.

"But it's looking at me."

Hiccup rolled his eyes. "Guess you've got a new friend."

"I don't want a new friend," Cauli spat. "Go away, shoo!"

The Changewing's eyes narrowed and she hung her head. She snuffed the floor and Cauli groaned.

"You hurt her feelings!" Hiccup gasped mockingly.

"Dragons aren't supposed to have feelings!"

"You are!" Hiccup countered. "You have an ally right in front of you, one who would risk her life and protect you to the ends of all things. You don't have to go through anything alone after this."

Cauli pursed her lips and sighed angrily. "I didn't ask for this! You're the one who strapped me to her like an animal, threw me over the ocean, I mean, the strap almost broke for Odin's sake, I could have died."

"I wouldn't have let you," Hiccup retorted simply. "That's what I'm trying to say. You have to put your faith in other people. You'll have to if we want any chance in avenging your father."

Cauli didn't respond. She merely stared at the dragon with a pained expression across her eyes. She growled again. "No more flying for me. I tried it and I know what I'm good at, and if you want me to have faith in you, you'll respect that."

Hiccup twisted his mouth and nodded slowly. "Alright. I can do that. But now you can at least tell Netmug he owes me some coin for proving him wrong."

Cauli's mouth fell open. "You had a bet?!" she hissed.

Hiccup shrugged as he tried to find the words. "I don't know if 'bet' is the proper term, but â€œ"

"Ugh," Cauli grimaced.

"Hey, at least you proved him wrong," Hiccup offered. Cauli glared at him and Hiccup raised his hands carefully. He backed away slowly and shook his head after a quiet laugh. "I'm kidding about the

bet."

"Hup!"

Hiccup tore away from Cauli and found Snowdrop hobbling towards him. One of her arms was outstretched towards him while the other was clasped in Rose's gentle grip. Snowdrop's splint kept her from walking alone, even though Juniper predicted she would not need the support soon. Hiccup smiled and met them in the middle, grabbing Snowdrop and lifting her to his hip.

"What are you doing away from Stoick, my little Terrible Terror?" he asked. Cauli watched them and she and Rose nodded to each other.

"Well, I was talking to Rose, and then she had an idea, and we wanted to tell you about it!" Snowdrop said with one big breath.

"Hey now, it wasn't me," Rose argued. "It was your little head that came up with this big plan, don't give me any credit!"

"Okay, well," Snowdrop continued without pause, "I was thinking that you know Toofless?"

"Yes, I am very familiar with him," Hiccup replied. Rose snorted as she joined Cauli on the ground.

"Apparently your first flight was very interesting," she tittered.

Cauli gasped. "Who told you?! We just landed!"

"The Changewing that had the pleasure told me just now. She says she hopes to do it again, given the circumstances."

"Ugh, no, stop it."

"No, really! Even though I pegged you for a Rumblehorn type."

"Well, if you find one, let me know," Cauli growled with sarcasm dripping from her mouth.

"Guys, shush! I'm telling Hup my plan!" Snowdrop whined. Hiccup readjusted her weight on his hip.

"It's alright, Snow, go on."

Snowdrop puffed out her chest and gave a strong nod with a squeak. "Okay. So Toofless has a new tail, right? We were wondering if you could do something for Stormfly."

Hiccup paused and looked over to the Nadder, who also became very interested in the idea by the sight of her cocking her head and giving a croak.

"I don't understandâ€|" Hiccup began. "You mean Stormfly's wing?"

"Snowdrop wants you to rebuild it," Rose added.

Hiccup's eyes widened. "What? Why?"

"Because Stormfly will find Astrid," Snowdrop said simply. Cauli looked to Rose, and the two of them shared a look.

"We've already tried to track them," Hiccup said sadly.

"Stormfly will hear Astrid, like you can hear Toofless," Snowdrop explained.

"If we can get the pair of them close enough, their bond will revive and we'd be able to find her," said Rose.

Hiccup bit his lip and gave it a thought. "I've already thought of itâ€! but I don't know how well that idea would work. The pressure and weight of something like that would be painful for Stormfly."

Rose raised a finger as she looked to Stormfly. She listened alone, then nodded. "She says it would be worth all the pain in the world, so your argument is invalid."

"Looks like you're about to get roped into something you're not so sure about," Cauli laughed. "Oh, how I love that."

* * *

><p>When Hiccup went to bed that night, he found himself staring at the ceiling of his treehouse. He tried to stay as warm as possible as Toothless perused a nearby river for some fish. He always wondered if he's<p>

After closing the Hangar and putting Snowdrop to bed alongside Stoick, Hiccup left to the safety of the forest. The village had built him a home in a large evergreen tree, high for watching the horizon for oncoming threats. Toothless flew him to the deck, where Hiccup dismounted and entered. The house itself was too small for a dragon, but the deck and the roof were big enough, depending on Toothless' mood. Hiccup crawled into the camouflaged hut after bidding his Night Fury a good night, and he crawled straight into his furs.

After the initial shivers from the chill-ridden furs has dissipated, Hiccup thought about the plans he'd have to make, and always the possibility of finding Astrid again.

Thankfully, sleep was easier that night. He didn't notice his eyelids close and his breaths change; he suddenly stopped thinking about Rose and Snowdrop and thought of the tiny questions his head asked as he crept into sleep, into dreams. And it dragged him down into the dreamscape with a heavy force until he fell into a deep sleep.

When he opened his eyes, he was lying on the earth, blades of grass tickling the webbing between his fingers. He hummed and stared at the endless sky above, stretching out over the grass and rolling over, relishing in the feelings surrounding him. He sat up slowly and took in his surroundings.

He recognized the cove walls as soon as he lied eyes on them. The rough texture of the rocks covered in lush, green moss towered around

him while a clear pond shimmered in front of him. He loved it here, and he was safe here. He crawled towards the shore of the pond and pulled himself into the cool water, submerging himself completely. He could breathe under the waves as he swam along the bottom, turning and floating. Tiny fish flittered around his face, and they darted away when he tried to grab them. Eventually, Hiccup returned to the surface and let himself float on his back, allowing the gentle ripples to carry him to the shore.

He felt the rocks slide against his back, but they didn't hurt. His body rested on the gravelly shore and he let his eyes fall shut to better take in the grass and the flowers through his nose. The smells of plants, the sounds of birds, everything was perfect, everything was peaceful.

He let his eyes fall open and he noticed a presence nearby. He sat up partially, propping himself up with his elbows, and found himself staring at Astrid as she sat under a nearby tree. She was humming to herself, braiding her hair and wrapping it around herself for fun. Hiccup smiled. The perfect dream.

Pushing himself to his feet, Hiccup brushed the excess water from himself and stumbled over the grass towards the tree. Astrid was still humming as he staggered over with a spring in his step. But by the time he had made it to her, she had stopped humming. Her fingers froze mid-braid and her eyes were fixed on Hiccup's feet.

"You know, never in my dreams did I think to find you preening," he said with a laugh.

Astrid didn't move. Hiccup frowned and crouched in front of her. He reached out and put his hand on her face, brushing his thumb over her lower lip.

"You're touching me," Astrid whispered, her eyes wider than the ocean. She looked up slowly, her eyes locking with Hiccup's. Her hand floated up to her face, and she wrapped her fingers around Hiccup's wrist. She squeezed it and Hiccup smiled at her softly.

"Hey, beautiful," he murmured. "You look terrified."

"You're touching me," she repeated, her face pale and trembling.
"You're touching me."

31. Almost

Sorry for the day's delay, guys! I've been struggling recently with a surgery that did not go according to plan, and trying to catch up on missed school because of it. I hope this finds everyone well! _

* * *

><p>Chapter Thirty-One: Almost

"You're touching me!" Astrid breathed again. She turned her head and her mouth fell into Hiccup's palm. Hiccup watched her, wondering, as Astrid covered his hand with hers. Suddenly, she leapt into his arms, smashing into him and sending the two of them sprawling over the shore of the cove and into the shallow waters of the cool lake.

Hiccup cried out as Astrid squealed.

"Hiccup!" she screamed. "Oh, Gods, I'm sorry!"

She quickly wrenched him to his feet. Hiccup shook the stars out of his head as Astrid jumped back.

"Wait, I mean, how did you, but I can't, you shouldn't be here, I'm happy you are, Gods, are you, I just ..." "

Hiccup grabbed her arms. "Whoa, Astrid, calm down. What are you doing?"

"I'm freaking out!" Astrid said, barely making a sound through her hysterics. "I've been here for so long and you've never touched me and ..." "

"Okay, question," Hiccup interjected. "When has me touching you been a bad thing?"

"Never! I'm not saying it is! But it doesn't make any sense and I don't know what ..." "

"It's my dream, it only makes sense that I'd see you."

Astrid shook her head and began pacing. "No! you don't get it," she said frantically. "This is my dreamland, and if you are here, then that means ... are you dead?"

"What?" Hiccup asked with a scoff. "No, I'm not dead, I'm sleeping. What is going on?"

"Hiccup, where do I begin? You'll be awake soon!"

Hiccup grabbed her wrists. "What is going on?"

"I'm in some kind of Underground," she said quickly. "I don't know where but I haven't seen the sky in months. Dagur took Ruffnut and I'm in the Hatchery ..." Hiccup, they don't let the mothers stay with their babies! And then on my first day, after being trapped in this horrible, horrible cell, they brought me there and I got bitten by a Monstrous Nightmare, and I was hit by a dart that puts dragons to sleep and ..." "

"Wait, what? I still don't ..." "

"This is real!" Astrid cried. "This whole dream is real, you can't forget! I'm alive, and I'm underground, and they have hundreds of dragons, broken and trapped."

"How can this be real?" Hiccup asked, his expression confused and sad. "I'm sorry, I don't understand!"

"Something has brought us here together, to a common dream. Maybe ... maybe our bond?"

Hiccup was about to say something before he noticed her boney hands in his, frailler than ever before.

"What happened to your hands?" he asked. Then he grabbed her face.

"You're thin â€“ thinner than I have ever seen you."

Astrid bit her lip. "I've been sleeping. I was poisoned and I haven't woken up quite yet. See? You wouldn't dream about me being like this. And you! How did you get this awful scar on your leg?"

Her fingers brushed his bare leg over where the Sun Sap had hit him, and they stood in silence as they looked at each other carefully.

"Snowdrop misses you," Hiccup murmured. Astrid snatched her hand back slightly, looking back up to Hiccup.

"Is she okay?" Astrid asked quickly. "Oh gods â€“ if this is real â€“ then I don't have to torture myself wondering if you're alive, if Snowdrop â€“"

"She's fine," Hiccup breathed, pressing his lips to her forehead firmly, smelling her smell that was tainted with something he was not familiar with. "I'm fine. And we're going to come for you one we know where they took you. Where they took Ruffnut. Where they took everyone."

"They're fortified," Astrid replied quickly. "There's no sunlight or fresh air. We're underground. There are hundreds of dragons down here, you have to tell Stoick."

Hiccup faltered. He tried to say something but took one second too long. Astrid looked between his eyes and suddenly became red.

"No. Oh gods, no, Hiccup?"

Hiccup shook his head slowly. "Dadâ€| got in between Snow and a Whispering Death. We're trying everything we can butâ€|"

He shook his head and stopped speaking. Astrid's mouth twitched and her face paled only slightly as she tried to find words.

"Odin's shield, you're the chief then."

"â€| Yeah. Everything I ever wanted." He gave a sad chuckle.

Astrid wrapped her arms around Hiccup and Hiccup crushed her against his chest. But Astrid felt something tug at her lower back. She pulled away and tried to kiss him, but something wrenched her away. She looked at her hands and her fingers slowly faded away.

"Oh no," Astrid whispered hoarsely. Hiccup tried to grab her hand but his hand went through hers as if she were smoke.

"What's happening?" Hiccup asked frantically. Astrid looked up to him and stumbled back, her body fading away.

"I'm waking up," Astrid replied, terror filling her heart. "Hiccup â€“"

But she was gone, leaving Hiccup in the cove alone with the ghosts of their dreamland. The birds kept chirping and the weaver weaved another blade of grass into her basket as Hiccup stared at the place Astrid had been standing in. He shivered and closed his eyes.

"I still don't understandâ€|"

* * *

><p>Astrid's body slammed back together, her mind reconnecting with her figure as she was torn from the dreamland. Her eyes ripped open and she threw herself from the bed she had been lying on. She rolled onto the floor and landed on her shoulder. She snapped up and looked this way and that, skittering back frantically. She crawled into the wall behind her and smacked her head. She couldn't breathe, she could barely get any air into her body.<p>

"Wildling?"

Astrid cried out at the sudden sound. It came from a dark corner of the room. She scrambled to her feet and found a fire-poker protruding from a small fire pit riddled with embers. She brandished it and pushed her hair away from her face with her elbow. Stargazer 'looked' around the room, turning her head this way and that, listening. Astrid began to tremble as she held the poker between herself and the blind woman.

She could see the woman was injured. Her eyes and her hair were bound in thin strips of brown cloth, hiding them from Astrid's sight. She wore loose men's attire; fabrics of itchy burlap and wool hung off her starved body.

"Who the hell are you?!" Astrid cried. "Where am I? What happened?"

Stargazer raised her hands calmly.

"You were hit with one of Birdsong's slumber darts," she said quickly with a voice that Astrid found calm and soothing. "My name is Stargazer, Birdsong brought you to me after what happened."

Astrid glared. But she noticed the bandages around her arm and shoulder. Obviously, she felt no pain, otherwise she wouldn't be carrying a fire-poker made of iron. But the bandages were thick and well-tied. She looked down at herself and saw her leg had been bandaged as well. She looked up at Stargazer slowly, suspicious.

"You did this?"

Stargazer licked her lips. "Surprised?"

"You're blind," Astrid spat through clattering teeth.

Stargazer shrugged one of her shoulders. "You're observant. Well done!"

Astrid scoffed and rolled her shoulders. She smelled blood and musty earth all around her, the memories of the dreamland fading away slowly. The flowers, the songs of the birds in the treetops, Hiccup's hand brushing her mouth so wonderfully, all a dream, all gone.

"Do you want any tea?" she asked politely, bringing Astrid out of her mournful reverie. "If so, it's in the pot next to the

fire-poker."

Astrid looked at the poker in her hands and looked over to the pot. She found the pot over the embers, steam rising from the contents within. She felt a void within her stomach. Sheepishly, she took the spoon from the pot and spooned the tea into her mouth sloppily after dropping the poker back into the pit. Besides the taste of soot, it tasted heavenly. And Astrid found herself slurping it over her dry and cracked tongue.

"Not too quickly, child!" Stargazer warned. "You haven't eaten in six weeks, you'll end up throwing it all up."

Astrid slowed herself only slightly as Stargazer found a seat by the wall. She relaxed against the stone wall, feeling the stone floor around herself. Her hands touched a pot of what appeared to be curdled milk. Astrid wrinkled her nose and squinted at it.

"So," Stargazer began with a light smile on her pale lips, "I'm sorry if moving you is adding to your disorientation. We had little choice but I think you'll be comfortable here."

Astrid took a gulp of air before she spooned more scalding tea down her throat, but she kept her eyes locked on Stargazer as she stirred the pot of milk.

"How does your arm feel?"

Astrid wiped her chin with the back of her hand and looked to her shoulder. It was bandaged thickly with browned gauze, which Astrid untied with stiff fingers. The bandages came away clean and her shoulder had healed with only the faintest of scars. "Of course, what with your magical tether to your creature, I can imagine your arm feels fine?"

Astrid glared at Stargazer. "I don't know what you're talking about," she murmured hoarsely.

"I changed your bandages every other day, child," Stargazer replied with a shrug. "After day two, you hardly needed them, if my fingers found the scars where they should have been. At first, I wasn't sure what that meant. But I left them on for when Alvin sent his men to check on you."

"Check on me?" Astrid asked.

"Not out of care, mind you. Just to see that you were still breathing. Dragon riders are rare, it turns out, and we have an apparent problem in our Hatch that needs a rider's touch."

"What do you mean? Are the dragons alright?" she asked quickly. Stargazer put the pot aside and thought of her words for a moment.

"We have been breeding eggs around here and Outcast Island since I came here years ago. Any dragon pair that we capture, we try to breed. Then we take the eggs and incubate them and await them to hatch. Once they grow, we then send them to the Pit, where they are trained outside of our control."

Out of disgust, Astrid scoffed and sniffed angrily. "Then you have everything under control," she spat.

"We did," Stargazer admitted at first, "but our eggs stopped hatching since we moved here."

"What do you mean?"

Stargazer rolled her shoulders and sighed a heavy sigh. "We have hundreds of eggs of all kinds. We warm them, we turn them, we have even disobeyed our superiors by giving them back to the mothers. But none â€“ not one â€“ has hatched. They sit in their nests and remain still."

Astrid had never heard of that before. Of course, there were dead eggs that never would have made it regardless, but there were always babies. Astrid didn't know what to say, but the door swung open and Birdsong stepped in, closing the door behind her.

"Star, I have news â€“"

She halted as soon as her eyes hit the empty bed. There was a moment of question before she turned as found Astrid sitting by the fire.

"You â€“ you're awake," she murmured. Stargazer made it to her feet quickly and felt for Birdsong.

"Only a few moments, Birdy," she said happily as Birdsong weakly grabbed her friend's hands. She pulled her towards the door.

"I needâ€¦ a moment with Wildling," Birdsong said quietly without any clear expression. Astrid felt herself huddle against the wall, her eyes flicking over to the iron firepoker embedded in the embers of the fire.

Birdsong shut the door behind Stargazer, who graciously took her leave, and she locked the door. When she turned, Astrid hand was halfway to the poker.

"How do you feel?" she began.

"Don't touch me," Astrid trembled.

"I don't have to touch you to ask the question."

"And you didn't have to shoot me, either."

"I didn't mean to, if that means anything to you," Birdsong said with a glare. "Howeverâ€¦ we need to have a little conversation. Just you and me."

Astrid growled and tried to lick her dry lips with her dry tongue. "You know, I would try to rip you apart if I weighed anything. Did you try to starve me while I slept?"

Birdsong laughed darkly, an ounce of offence in her voice. "Actually, I force-fed as much as you would let me, but it turns out that even unconscious, you'd rather throw it up instead of being grateful. If I wanted you dead â€“ if I wanted to starve you â€“ I'd have already

done it."

"Why haven't you, then?"

"Because I don't want to," Birdsong replied simply. She stepped forward and Astrid snatched the firepoker from the flames. Birdsong stopped and watched with an eyebrow raised as Astrid struggled to her feet as the firepoker weighed her starved arm down.

"Don't be ridiculous," Birdsong snorted. "You're wasting your time. I'm not who you want to kill."

"You don't know that."

"And this is why I wanted to have that wee talk with you. Because it turns out that I have some information that would pose more of an advantage to you than that iron stick."

"Then start talking!" Astrid yelled.

Birdsong frowned. "Fine. I was going to try to put this delicately, but your friend Ruffnut is gone."

At first, Astrid didn't hear the words properly. "What?" she asked with a catch in her throat.

"Dagur," Birdsong added. "I want to explain, and I'll be honest with you. I give you my word as a Berk woman."

"That's the shittiest word you could have ever given me, I don't even know you!" Astrid wheezed.

"You do, you just don't remember me."

"Stop lying to me and tell me why my friend isâ€| isâ€|"

"Astrid. Your name is Astrid. House Hofferson."

That wasn't news to Astrid, but she remembered that she hadn't told Birdsong, or anyone in the Underground, her real name. She was Wildling. Not Astrid. She let the firepoker weigh her arm down until it was touching the floor once more. "You were born during the peak of the harshest winter our families had ever felt in our lifetime. Your mother was Sigourney, my very good friend. You would come to my house to play with my son on occasion."

Astrid felt her body grow tired. "There were a lot of children on Berk when I was little. I don't know who you are."

But she did. She didn't want to, but she did. She could see the same flecks of green in Birdsong's eyes. And then she noticed Birdsong's slightly rounded nose. And how close it was to her thin lips. Astrid shook her head slightly. "Noâ€| you can't be."

Birdsong smiled. "Aye, but I can."

"No, I would have known â€""

"Sometimes we have to point these things out to those who have their eyes wide open," Valka mused gently.

"Stoick said â€""

"That I was dead? Hmm. Perhaps it is easier for him to think that. But your friendâ€| she was sick. You know of the infection that her body was fraught with?"

Astrid felt the firepoker slip from her fingers and clang to the floor. And for some reason, even though she didn't trust Valka entirely, she found herself stumbling towards Valka. "No, I promised her that â€""

Valka grabbed Astrid's tiny, frail, and shivering body. She pulled Astrid into her arms and held her on the edge of the bed. She rocked her gently as Astrid felt her eyes burn, but no tears would come from her dehydrated body.

"Alvin found out that Hiccup's wife was under our roof, and he needed to execute her so no one would know. Ruffnut, already sick, took your place."

Astrid squeezed her eyes shut and curled into a ball, holding her stomach. "Noâ€|"

"She didn't feel anything," Valka promised her. "Alvin is satisfied and has no reason to question you. You're safe for now."

"Noâ€|" Astrid repeated. She groaned and suddenly, her stomach lurched painfully and she threw herself upon the stone floor. In a single wave, the tea came splurging from her body. It coated the floor around her hands. Valka left the bed and pulled Astrid's hair out of the way as Astrid spat the rest up.

"I hate him," Astrid seethed as drool dribbled through her gnashing teeth. "It should have been me. It should have been me!"

"Hush, child. There is nothing we can do about that now."

"Why didn't you just tell me?" Astrid asked, turning her head only slightly to glare at Valka. "Why didn't you say who you were?"

"I thought my Hiccup was dead," Valka replied coldly. "I let Alvin make me believe that he was poisoned. And that Rose â€""

"Rose?" Astrid asked, confused.

"Aye, Rose. He let me believe both my children were dead."

Astrid sat up and grabbed Valka's arm to help steady herself. "I â€" I don't know â€""

"Rose is my daughter, Astrid, as much as Hiccup is my son. I'm guessing she chose to keep that part of herself a secret before you were taken?"

Astrid could only manage a nod, but it made things so much clearer: how Toothless would randomly sniff Rose suspiciously, like at the wedding. And how she had no home to speak of, yet made her presence known.

"Does Stoick know? Any of this?" she asked quietly.

Valka looked away. "I don't believe so. When I found out I was pregnant, I chose to keep it a secret. Between her and Hiccup, I'd had so many miscarriages. It broke Stoick's heart every timeâ€| so I decided to wait for once until I knew the baby would stick. I was going to tell him around the time I was captured."

"And that baby was Roseâ€| "

"Turns out the gods made me wait for her," Valka said with a sad smile. "When she was among us, she told Alvin that she wasn't his child, as I let him believe â€" the only way Alvin would have left Rose alone would have been if I lied and said she was Alvin's daughter and not Stoick's â€" but Rose grew tired of the faÃ§ade. Alvin hit her and she ran off, only to sneak her way into the arena. She was bitten by one of our largest dragons, Skyripper. Next thing I knew, she woke up from her injuries saying she could hearâ€| voices."

"The bond," Astrid finished. "That was how she got the bond."

Valka rubbed her face. "I never fully believed her, but there were too many things that were hard to not believe. She said that Skyripper chose her because she was Hiccup's blood, and before I could stop her, she began to plant words in the minds of whoever would listen. Talk of a Saviour spread across the island like wildfire. Then Alvin ordered the Skrill, Crashers, to kill this so-called Saviour everyone raved about. When that failed, I asked Alvin to send Rose to the wedding. He didn't know that the ruckus was caused by her, but I needed to get her to a safe place to let things calm down. Thankfully, Alvin still values my word more than most, so he listened."

Valka leaned back and Astrid rubbed her belly as another wave of nausea tugged against it. "When she came back without any useful information, Alvinâ€| chained her and announced they were leaving Outcast Island. He must have found out about her involvement in the rebellion. He lit the whole island aflame and forced me to bid her farewell. And Dagur revealed this â€" this concoction he brewed on our shores called Outcast Orchid, and they began to pick off the leaders one by one. Everything happened so fast and before I knew it, I was motherlessâ€| until now."

Astrid swallowed and Valka grabbed Astrid's frail hands. "Too long have I forced myself to suffer at the hands of evil men, who murder children and dragons and call themselves righteous. Too long have I been blind to the magic of my children, who have defied death and whose hearts call to mine every night. Ever since I saw you and saw what you did with that dragon, I was ready to open my eyes."

"What are you saying?" Astrid asked shakily.

"I am not going to sit here while my daughter-in-law suffers as I have. We need an uprising. We need to finish what Rose began and we need to get back to our husbands. We need the Saviour and all that the name entails. I will not watch as another Berkian submits to the ways of an Outcast."

Astrid fell onto her backside, trying to keep up. "I can't fight,"

she admitted. "Look at me. I've lost everything I had before and I don't know how to get it back."

"I have connections," Valka assured her. "I will get you more food, spread the word as much as I can, train with you, and keep my ears open for anything we can use to our advantage. We only have a moon or two to act before the ice closes our only way out."

32. The Stowaway

Thank you all for being patient with this adventure. Being a student in this day and age is equivalent to getting the soul sucked out of all your orifices. I hope life is treating you all gently and generously. Thank you all to the reviews, which keep me writing everyday. _

* * *

><p>Chapter Thirty Two: The Stowaway

The sea was beautiful, as it was everyday that Trader Johann graced himself with her beauty. The waves were calm today, and the clouds were blowing across the sky quickly. He smiled to himself.

"We'll be on time today, Fancy Freya," he said to a railing of his beloved ship. He grinned as he skipped over to his hammock, which was tied between two poles he custom-built for this specific purpose, and climbed in. From his hanging position, he watched the wheel of his ship jerk around ever so slightly this way and that. He reached into his jacket pocket and pulled his compass forth, double checking a few things before grinning again. Then, in another jacket pocket, he pulled out a tiny mirror he was gifted by a strange tribe of southerners along with his favourite pot of moustache wax.

Comfy and cozy, Johann twiddled with his moustache as he did at some point every day. After all, there was very little to do on a vessel during the long trips, so braiding and knotting and curling his moustache became almost entertaining.

"Sailing on the Viking Sea in my beautiful ship,
With ne'er a care or worry,
On my way to find where my money is,
Which always makes me merry."

He tittered on in his little improvised song as he braided his moustache, throwing a bead into the mix for further embellishment and pizazz.

"Fancy Freya is my lady, and the sea is her man,
But I am not a jealous fellow,
I let her love her lad through day and night,
And Iâ€¢ well, I don't know a word that rhymes with fellow that makes sense, oh dearâ€¢"

Trader Johann gave up singing and stared at his handy work in the mirror. He took advantage of the gentle rocking of his ship until he saw a speckle of islands in the distance. Recognizing the check point, he rolled out of his hammock in an embarrassing fashion and lightly jogged to the wheel. He gave it a theatrical turn as he hummed to himself happily.

"Should be there before the sun falls," he mused. "What to do, what to do!"

He spun on his heel and skipped over to his pile of goods. He hadn't felt need to crack into some of the new barrels the Outcasts and Berserkers had given him. He hated going to the Underground, but business was business. The least he could do was wait until he was far, far away from that hell-hole to even look at what they dared give him.

He lifted his nets to prepare them for when he landed at a fishing camp nearby and pulled some chests and barrels forward. Within those that weren't full of Sun Sap, he found half-rate armour, which he wasn't surprised about, as well as the odd sword and bushel of brittle arrows. There was a small box of trinkets Alvin had gifted him, saying he commissioned them himself. Trader Johann wasn't blind; he could see they were the makings of Berkian hands, along with the elaborate carving of the east and the silversmithing of the west. He wrinkled his nose at the thought of the Battle of Berk, and how it sickened him. Berk was his favourite island. Master Hiccup and his companions of dragon riders proved to be more charitable than anywhere else, both in goods and in favours.

Alvin and Dagur made Trader Johann promise to never venture by those battle-ridden islands after the attacks. And if they had fallen as they had told him, there was no use in trying to sail there. It would only waste time. That is what he told himself, at least, to make himself feel better, even if he always kicked himself for not seeing if there were survivors. Alvin said there weren't.

So Johann shoved the thought out of his mind as he did everyday and rummaged around until he found something very interesting in a box that Birdsong had given him along with the barrel. He grabbed it and pulled the chain forth.

It was a necklace; the chain was made with long silver so fine that it looked to belong to royalty. From it dangled a single small black scale that shined with the tiniest shades of violet and midnight blue. It was a dragon scale and it enraptured Johann. He spun around to look at it in better light, running to the front of the ship.

"What a beauty, what a beauty!" he cried. "Yes, this will do, this will do! What is it? Not many black dragons around, last I checked, but â€""

Too excited, he ran down the stars that led into the body of his vessel. He practically crashed into the bucket of mop water he was looking for. He grabbed it and hauled it upstairs back into the light of day. He crouched and dunked the scale into the water, giggling. He washed the scale clean and watched the light gleam off it beautifully.

"It's perfect!" he squealed. "I could buy a new sail for you, Freya, I know it!"

Suddenly, he heard a crash behind him, the sound of barrels falling and tumbling, clunking into the wood of the deck. He jumped violently and spun around. What he saw was the most terrifying and disturbing thing he had ever seen in his entire life.

A body, bloody and unrecognizable, spilled from a barrel. It coughed and wheezed and reached forward with distorted fingers as it birthed itself from the cramped space of the barrel. It tumbled free and Johann screamed. A shrill shriek of the highest and loudest proportion exploded from Johann's chest as the body crawled towards him.

"GHOST!" he cried, his voice so loud, it could crack glass. "UNDEAD! FOUL CREATURE OF THE UNDERWORLD! VALHALLA SAVE ME!"

He scrambled to his feet and raced for the railing, but of course, there was no where for him to go on this little ship. He seized the bucket of water and hurled it at the creature. The water splashed right into its face, and it coughed.

"Hey! Stop it!" the person complained. It coughed and wiped the murky water from its eyes. "What the hell, Johann?!"

"What are you doing on me ship, you â€“ you â€“ you beast! What do you want? My heart? You'll have to fight me first!"

"What are you talking about?!" Ruffnut asked loudly, spitting the water out of her mouth. She rubbed her face vigorously to clean the dried blood from her skin, then wiped through her shaved hair, cringing.

"I don't take stow-aways lightly, you â€“ whatever you are, and I must ask â€“ you must tell me, I mean â€“ why you are on my ship!"

"Hey man, Birdsong said she arranged a deal with you."

"Birdsong?!" Johann squeaked. "Oh, that sneaky, tricky little minx! Only she would pull something this stupid. Never again! She was always saying that she'd have something special for me, like maybe some jewelry or a â€“ a â€“ I don't know â€“ not a person! Oh gods!"

"You had no idea?" Ruffnut asked. "She didn't tell you?"

"NO, SHE DID NOT."

Ruffnut blew a breath out through puffed cheeks. "Wow. Alright, then. Nice reunion, at least. Do you have any more water you can splash me with, or should I jump out of another barrel first?"

"I am not giving you anything, young lady, until you tell me why you are on my ship."

Ruffnut blinked. "You'reâ€¦ wow, you're reallyâ€¦ uhâ€¦ dense. Dense is the word, right? Yeah, dense."

Johann glared, still terrified. "All I know is that Birdsong gave me a lady covered in blood, so forgive me if I require an explanation."

"Oh for f â€“" Ruffnut wiped her face again. "Stop it! I'm from Berk, okay? And Birdsong busted me out so I could go back and tell them what's going on."

"Berk? No, that's not possible, you're not from Berk."

"Dense. Definitely," Ruffnut sighed angrily. "Ruffnut and Tuffnut, we rode the Zippleback with Hiccup. Then, there was the battle and Astrid â€“ the Nadder rider and the wife to the heir of Berk and the surrounding islands â€“ was captured along with me. Now, we have to get me back to my brother so I can tell everyone that Astrid is alive. That scale you're carrying? Astrid's wedding token in place of a ring. And if you sell it, you're dead."

Ruffnut crossed her arms as Johann paled hilariously. "Good gracious gods and everything holy," he choked. "Berk didn't fall?"

"I don't really know the answer to that, Johann!" Ruffnut replied. "But we'll both find out. Because you are going to take me home."

Johann laughed nervously. "Haha, well, I don't really think, um, that I can really do that, nope."

Ruffnut only stared at him until he crumpled.

"Alright, fine, but I'm only looking, and I'm dropping you off and I'm leaving."

"Whatever," Ruffnut shrugged. "Now can I have some water to wash myself off?"

Trader Johann blinked and looked at the bucket in his hands. "Uhâ€¦ yes, butâ€¦ well, hang tight, I'll think of something."

* * *

><p>Trader Johann landed at the fishing camp on time, but with bleaker spirit than before. He let the fishermen wander his boat, grabbing furs and line mostly, along with food while Ruffnut washed herself on the iceberg, cursing and swearing as she splashed cold water over herself as fast as she could. The iceberg slowly grew pink around her, but she managed to wash her hair clean to its natural blonde hue and her face was back to it's normal tone. The fishermen wanted to ask questions, but Johann wouldn't answer. She merely watched them trade and leave as Ruffnut wrapped herself in some clothing Johann gave her. She returned to the deck of the ship and helped Johann push off towards Berk.<p>

"Thanks for the clothes," Ruffnut said quietly. "They're warm."

"You stayed in that barrel for days," Johann immediately quipped.

"Birdsong gave me drugs, what can I say?"

Johann balked. "Uhâ€| well â€" okay."

Ruffnut shivered as she tried to bring her body temperature back to normal. "How long until we get to Berk?"

Johann groaned. "Do we really have to go? I mean, it's so out of our way and â€""

"I can break your neck using only my index finger and cave your ribcage in with my lower back, in case you're wondering." She peered over at Johann with a deadened look in her eyes. Johann squeaked.

"Ohâ€| really? Iâ€| didn't know that wasâ€| possible," Johann mumbled.

"Neither did my brother, till I showed him. Not so much the broken neck thing, of course, but I'm saving it for when someone really pisses me off. Like if they were, say, to not take me home to Berk.

"Did I say that?" Johann asked with a high hitch in his voice. "I didn't say that. I know it may have sounded like that, but it didn't."

"Uh-huh. Okay."

Johann sighed and looked to the pile of containers on his ship. "Fine. Gods save me. The trip will take us a while. Could take us a week in forgiving weather, but considering Berk isn't terribly forgiving, it's going to take us much, much longer."

"So you'll do it?" Ruffnut asked with a blonde eyebrow raised.

Trader Johann groaned. "I don't want to! But you're here already, and if Berk hasn't fallenâ€| I guess they'd be needing wares. And an apology."

Ruffnut frowned as Johann left the rail to turn the wheel slowly. He pulled a compass out of his pocket and adjusted the wheel slowly.

"Why would you have to apologise?" she asked curiously.

Johann didn't look up. "Besides the fact that I'm plagued with a wrenching feeling of abandonment and self-loathing?"

Ruffnut twisted her mouth with a dark laugh that tried to escape her lips. "Compared to everyone else I know, you've had it easy."

Johann's jaw dropped. "Are you serious?! I'm sorry, young lady, but when your only source of income â€" that being trade â€" and your only way to get your goods around â€" that being the ocean â€" is controlled by a young man named Dagur the Deranged or Disastrous or whatever D-word you'd like to label him, it puts me in a very tight spot. You think I didn't want to go back to Berk? That I â€" I â€" I just woke up and thought to myself that 'Oh, well, I think I'd like

to never go back to Berk again all of a sudden!" No, that's not what happened! If I went back, they'd have my ship! And my head, but more importantly, my ship! I meanâ€| I meanâ€|"

Johann trailed off at the sight of Ruffnut, who lost attention to him a few sentences beforehand. Andâ€| she was crying. Only gently, subtly, as she looked up at the sky. She shuddered and swallowed painfully. She used a ragged fist to wipe away a single tear. Johann shifted uncomfortably as Ruffnut trailed the silver linings of the storm clouds with her blue eyes. She ran a hand through her stubbly hair and smiled slightly.

"I missed the sky," she whispered hoarsely. "Iâ€| I forgot how big it was."

Trader Johann frowned and hung his head. He twiddled his thumbs awkwardly.

"There's a bed in the pit for you if you want," he offered sheepishly. "I only have the one bed, but I'm sure I can figure something out."

"Thanks," Ruffnut murmured quietly. "I think I'm gonna stay out here for a while longer. Soak it all in."

"Take all the time you need," Johann said quickly. "I don't mean to rush at all! I mean, after being underground for so long, I can imagine that you'd appreciate the fresh air and open ocean and the cold, unless you hate being cold, because if that's the case, then I can fetch a fur or four from the stock."

"I'll let you know," Ruffnut replied politely.

Trader Johann smiled tightly as Ruffnut turned to face him.

"And thank you. For taking me home. In advance. You never know when you get to thank people, you know?"

Johann softened about the eyes and mouth. "Aye. That I do. But now that Master Hiccup is less dead than I thought, I guess I have another chance beside you."

And he smiled as Ruffnut craned to neck to see the sky once more, her eyes drinking in the freedom cloud by cloud. She sighed and smelled the fresh ocean air. The cold prickled against the tip of her nose and she shivered; the Underground had been so hot and stifling at times as the Sun Sap dripped behind the walls, suffocating.

"But," Johan added quickly, "we should make a few rules if we're going to do this."

"Don't touch me would be one," Ruffnut said instantly like a viper, snapping out of her reverie. "And we are going to do this, not if."

Johann shrugged and left her, grabbing a taught rope and spinning around it for fun. "Wrong. If we are to do this, then we need to think smart. We can't just cut across the ocean with food for one skinny man. We need to stop at a couple ports, make some trade, and where there's trade, there's people. People who would prefer to know

the truth about our hero."

Ruffnut squinted. "We can't go about telling people Hiccup is alive, either."

"Why not?" Johann laughed. "Oh, I bet that would get the boys boiling! Think about it! Everyone â€“ every little island and the people upon them â€“ believe the legendary Hiccup is dead. Do all people agree with his ways about dragons? No. Do all people agree that Alvin and Dagur need to be destroyed? Probably."

Johann let go of the rope and tugged against it for good measure.

"Besides, with winter rolling in faster than us sailors care for, storms are popping up like babies in springtime. If we hang close to the coast for as long as possible, then we should be fine."

"Should be?" Ruffnut asked with a wrinkle in her nose.

"It's all probable when you're on the mighty waves!" Johann laughed. "So rule number one on Fancy Freya: if there's a storm, you tie yourself to the ship and focus only on your own survival."

"Fancy Freya?" Ruffnut interrupted with a snort. "Your ship's name is Fancy Freya?"

Johann's smile dropped. "Rule number two: don't make fun of my ship."

Ruffnut raised her hands to let it go.

"Rule number three," Johann continued. "I sail the ship, I make the sailing path, I choose the schedule â€“ with you in mind, of course."

"Fine," Ruffnut agreed. "Is that all?"

Johann thought for a second, then nodded gingerly. "I believe so. I'm sure more will come up."

Ruffnut returned to looking in the sky.

"So where are they?" she asked. "Where are all the dragons?"

Johann paused, a rope in his hands, his face twisted ever so slightly at a resistance in his thoughts.

"They haven't been around these parts for over a winter, if I remember correctly. Dagur scouted out his place with his father years ago and rumour has it, he culled the place shortly after his peaceful father died. Any dragons that are native to here are either dead orâ€¦ back from where you came from."

Ruffnut didn't say anything until a different question entered her mind. "Where are we now?" she asked as she looked between the icebergs in the distance against barren shores, the sky as grey as the water.

"North. North and a tad to the right, farther than anyone dares

travel, but you didn't hear it from me. Your arm is bleeding, I see," he said nervously.

"Yeah, it does that," Ruffnut replied quietly, discomforted at the quiet skies above her, knowing Hiccup and the riders had never flown this far from Berk.

33. Myths and Legends

Happy Friday, everyone! Hope all is well, as usual! Is anyone else feeling the impending doom of end of semester? I certainly am, so I may be a little quieter in the next few weeks. Chappies are still done and ready for posting, it's just finding editing time. I hope my readers in the States have a great Thanksgiving, and keeping in that spirit since I forgot to do this for my own Canadian Thanksgiving, thank you to all my readers, followers, and reviewers for the support._

* * *

><p>Chapter Thirty-Three: Myths and Legends

"Remember when I called you crazy? I think you may have overstepped that line and fallen into insanity," Gobber admitted gruffly. Hiccup, hands on his hips, shrugged and smiled.

"Being sane didn't really get my anywhere, anyway," he sighed.

The two men scrutinized the makeshift wing Hiccup had crafted for Stormfly and truth be told, neither of them were sure if it would work. Constructed from leather and metal rods, it seemed to be a much larger version of Toothless' tail. It took Gobber, Hiccup, and Snotlout to drag the monolithic creation outside the forge. Tuffnut had since gone to retrieve Stormfly while Hiccup questioned everything from his blueprints down to the stitches that held the dozens of pieces of leather together.

"Do you think it will work?" Gobber asked.

Hiccup twisted his mouth and rubbed his chin. "I won't know for sure until I know she'll even wear it, but then we'd have to test it and work out the kinks."

Gobber groaned. "This isn't like Toothless, Hiccup," he said, pointing to the wing with his hammer-prosthetic. "If Stormfly falls, she falls hard, when Toothless falls, at least he can slow it down some."

The two men straightened at the sight of Stormfly ascending the hill from the Hangar, trodding behind Tuffnut. Hiccup blinked at the sight of Rose walking next to Tuffnut, laughing and joking with him as Snowdrop hobbled as fast as she could to keep up. Gobber looked to Hiccup suspiciously.

"Are you going to be okay with Rose here?" he asked.

Hiccup gave an uncommitted nod, unsure and nervous. But after their altercations, Rose had actively avoided Hiccup, barely trading words

with him. Their last fight in Stoick's chamber had struck a chord within her to a point where Hiccup wanted to both apologize and yet hold his ground. There were still questions he wanted to ask that kept him from deciding. He still had no way of knowing Rose's claim to his bloodline was true, and even if it wasn't, the possibility of villagers finding out would cause a stir. And since having that dream with Astrid a week or two before, Hiccup was torn between seeking advice from Rose or keeping his distance.

Only a few feet from Hiccup, who could care less about their conversation, Tuffnut leaned over and whispered something in Rose's ear. She scoffed and laughed loudly, shoving Tuffnut away bashfully. And Hiccup, in a strange turn of emotion, felt his gut clench. Gobber peered over and furrowed his brow.

"Still mad at the lass?"

Hiccup looked over, deadpan. Gobber sighed.

Rose looked up and must have noticed because she straightened both her face and her shoulders and immediately transitioned from light-hearted to stern. She cleared her throat and Tuffnut, still snorting away, awkwardly resigned himself, giving Rose a little wave before turning and walking away. Hiccup kept his eyes on Rose.

"Are we going to fix Stormfly today?" Snowdrop asked, out of breath, grabbing Hiccup's pants. "Hup? Hello? Hup?"

Hiccup looked down at Snowdrop and forced a smile. "We're going to give it a gallant effort, Terror. Why don't you go stay by the forge and watch."

"Can I help?" Snowdrop asked with a pout. "Please? I want to help!"

"You can help by staying safe, wee thing," Gobber piped in, scooping Snowdrop up with his hammer-clad arm, tickling her belly with the other. "Off to the forge with ye!"

Hiccup was already pulling the wing open on the ground, unclasping the belts that would secure the contraption to the beast. Rose grabbed Stormfly's bridle, whispering to her and calming her.

"You can't stay mad at me forever," she murmured as Hiccup dragged the leather over the ground, unfurling the wing fully.

"I'm trying to not be, I really am," Hiccup mumbled as he dropped the wing.

"I don't believe that," Rose said coldly. "I don't want to talk to you either, but I think my passive-aggressive silent-treatment phase can wait until after we get Astrid back."

He was about to argue â€“ loudly, too â€“ before Gobber returned to them. Rose smirked and returned to Stormfly. "Down, on your side," Rose murmured soothingly. The sudden change of emotion bothered Hiccup more than he wanted it too and he stepped back, fuming. The dragon shifted nervously before tucking in her wing. She kneeled and keeled over, rolling onto her back and croaking in discomfort. "We must move quickly before she grows restless," Rose said, abandoning

the bridle. She grabbed Stormfly's wing, scarred and misshapen and brittle, and pulled it open. Hiccup and Gobber dragged the mechanical wing under hers as quick as they could. Hiccup crawled onto the leather wing and grabbed Stormfly's wing, pushing it into one of the open belts.

"Okay, ease her down; Gobber, you fasten the lower pieces and I will fasten the others."

The two men got to work while Rose pushed Stormfly's wing down with all her body weight. The Nadder groaned and thrashed slightly.

"Hurry, she's uncomfortable."

Hiccup bit his lower lip in concentration as he quickly pulled the first belt taught, clicking it into place and tucking the rest of the belt into a loop to hold it. Gobber was having a harder time, what with only having one set of fingers, but he soon managed to fasten his first belt as Hiccup was finishing his third. Rose kept the wing pushed down as Hiccup, one by one, ran and crawled over the leather and metal contraption to secure all twelve of the belts while Gobber resigned himself to holding the Nadder down as she wriggled like a cat being squeezed.

"Okay â€“"

As soon as Hiccup breathed a sound of completion, Stormfly bolted upright and over, squaking and squealing in anger and discomfort. She threw Hiccup off her violently. He flew forward, a gasp caught in his throat as he careened straight for Rose. Their bodies collided and Rose tumbled back. The pair rolled once, twice, until they came to a shaky halt. Thankfully unhurt, Hiccup jumped to his feet. Rose stayed on the ground holding her face.

"Are you alright?" he asked quickly.

"I'm â€“ I'm fine," she replied. She pulled herself to her feet, a hand covering her mouth. She looked at the palm she used to conceal her lips and found a streak of blood. Little â€“ almost insignificant â€“ from the inside of her lips when Hiccup's body connected with her face. Nothing big, she knew. She closed her hand and threw her thought from her mind, looking straight at Stormfly.

The dragon was panting labouriously. The wing was weighing her down, but she managed to keep it off the ground, only by inches.

It is so heavy, she told Rose.

Rose met Hiccup, who was standing in front of the dragon with hands raised. Gobber had another hand up to help.

"She says it's too heavy," Rose told Hiccup.

Sweat beaded upon Hiccup's forehead. "I tried to make it as light as possible but it still needs someone to pull the levers from the saddle."

He reached up and grabbed her bridle, ducking under her head and climbing up the saddle. Stormfly groaned again.

"Levers?" Rose asked, looking over Stormfly to Hiccup as he fiddled with a lever.

"Stormfly is too weak to open something like this on her own. The most we can expect her to do with her damaged wing is flap it up and down. Opening and closing it fast enough would need some help. So pulling this lever would pull it taught and in."

Hiccup demonstrated, cranking the lever from the wing that rested over Stormfly's neck. Rose and Gobber peered underneath and watched the ropes lining the metal framework pull the outer rods and leather towards Stormfly, folding it.

"And releasing it would push it back out."

Rose stepped back and crossed her arms. "It'sâ€¦ it's not terribly practical."

Hiccup glared at her, dismounting Stormfly. "I didn't make it for racing, Rose. I made it to get her off the ground."

"So what if there is an enemy, something that makes her flee? What if she has to perform a roll? Or dive?"

"If I can figure it out with Toothless, Stormfly's interim rider can, too," he argued.

"Which will be who, exactly?" Rose countered. "That wing is already weighing her down, the weight of five men, and you expect her to carry another?"

"She's right, Hiccup," Gobber admitted. "Who would ride her? Rose here is our lightest rider and even she is too big."

"I haven't thought that far, yet," Hiccup groaned. He shook his head and looked to Stormfly.

I want to fly, Stormfly told Rose as she looked back at Hiccup. I want to find her.

"She wants to fly," Rose reiterated reluctantly.

"Well, she can't," Hiccup spat under his breath. "Not yet. Not today, at least. I need to look at the drawings again, maybe there are some rods that I can strip, butâ€!"

"We all want this to work," Gobber assured him. "We all want to know where our families are. But we have to do it right."

"Aye," Rose agreed. "Let me see your drawings."

"That won't be necessary, thank you," Hiccup said, waving towards her as he started his way back into the forge. "Besides, you have people to get back to."

Rose frowned angrily and Gobber rolled his eyes, grumbling as he grabbed Stormfly's bridle. "Come along, Snowdrop, let's take our Nadder back to the Hangar."

Snowdrop, disheartened and looking at the ground, waddled past Rose as she marched after Hiccup into the forge. By the time Snowdrop and Gobber were on their way, Rose walked behind Hiccup.

"What was that supposed to mean?" she asked loudly.

Hiccup didn't turn, so she grabbed his arm and spun him around.

"You think I'm involved with someone," she seethed.

"I didn't say it, you did," he replied, swatting her away to get back to his work.

"And how is it any of your business?"

Hiccup paused, his hands on his drawing desk, still. He looked over to Rose slowly, looking deep into her eyes, something he had been refusing to do since he betrayed her.

"If you are so adamant that I am your brother," he said quietly, "then you would understand that me being unfavourable towards a possible relationship with Tuffnut means that I am doing so for you. I don't want to fight with you anymore. I don't want to talk anymore, either. But I have to. I can't get my wife back unless I do but now you seem to be set on loathing every moment with me."

Rose scoffed, snapping out of her reverie. "Funny how the tables turn at times like this. You wouldn't even acknowledge my wisdom until I had to smash it into your head over and over. It doesn't change the fact that words were said. And you may think you're doing a great job with what you have, but you can also be ruthless when it comes to your forgiveness."

Hiccup licked his lip and sat in his chair. "I know. You don't have to remind me, I know."

"I'm leaving," she sighed. "I'm going to the Hangar. Not that you care." She moved to leave, storming towards the overcast light outside.

"I had another dream," Hiccup blurted. He didn't mean to entirely, but the words were already out like tiny baby dragons fleeing their mother. Rose stopped at the doorway. She didn't move.

"A dream?" she asked, anger still lingering on her tongue.

"A vision," he added on shakily. "But I don't know what to make of it."

"When?" she asked quietly, her back still turned to him.

"A week ago, maybe longer," he replied. "It felt like the ones I had before. With the Skrill and the Scauldron. Onlyâ€¦ completely different."

He placed a blistered hand over his eyes and sighed sleepily, wondering if Rose was still there, still listening. Only when he heard her sit on his drawing table did he feel his shoulders relax slightly.

"How was it different?" she asked.

"Astrid was there."

He looked up to Rose but couldn't read her face. She remained passive, blank almost. She wasn't looking at Hiccup but the ground, in a trance almost.

"Didâ€| she see you? Did she know you were there with her?"

Hiccup blinked. "â€|She said she could see me. And she started rambling on about where she wasâ€| but there are chunks I can't remember, like a dream. She said she was underground somewhere. It's hot. And they have dragons, hundreds of themâ€| I can't really remember anything else."

Rose swallowed audibly and Hiccup noticed. She was pale but her cheeks were flushed.

"Should I believe her?" he asked.

Rose sucked her breath in and held it for a moment. "I thinkâ€| you should. Definitely."

"But how?"

"Our bond," Rose said with a dry mouth. She closed her eyes. "Our bond. We have been going to the same dreamland."

"My bond is to Toothless," Hiccup said, wonderingly. Rose looked up, her lips in a thin line.

"There's one more piece to the puzzle that I have not told you about," she murmured in response. "Come with me, outside. We'll talk. I'll tell you everything."

Hiccup's face went cold. "I thought you had already been honest with me."

"I have been. I justâ€| wasn't sure how you'd respond."

Rose led the way out of the forge, walking down a side-path towards the forest. She was slow, walking with heavy steps until she made her way towards the cliffs. Neither of the siblings talked to each other. Hiccup had hundreds of questions bumbling about in his brain but for once, he let her lead him away from all other eyes and ears. She eventually stopped at the edge of the cliff and sat among the tall dry grass. She pulled her furry coat around her frame tightly, looking over the ocean. Hiccup sat next to her and watched the waves with her for a few minutes in silence.

"There is a legitimate reason as to why I can't save our father the same way I saved Astrid," she said.

Hiccup remained quiet. He wanted her to speak, he wanted explanation. He knew if he didn't like what she had to say, he could leave. It would be easy. So he was safe.

"When I was bonded to Skyripper, he wasn't sure of what he was doing. He was using a myth as inspiration. The myth of the mother

dragon."

"I haven't heard of it!" Hiccup said.

"It's a story only dragons tell, because man cannot believe it."

Hiccup didn't understand.

"The story of the mother dragon is about the creation of all dragons," Rose began. "She used to be the messenger between Valhalla and our world, the only one who could travel the rainbow bridge. She was the only one who could fly there with her massive wings made of precious stones and silks and godly goods that every man craved. They say that at night, you could see the jewels of the webbing of her wings."

"The stars," Hiccup guessed. Rose nodded.

"But one day, she fell in love with a brave soldier, one who could take down empires with a single smile. The gods warned her that humans are mortal and she was not, and she would face heartbreak more painful than flying into a thousand suns."

Rose took a shaky breath before she continued. "The soldier finally fell in battle. He was blinded when one of the gemstones from her wing reflected the daylight into his eyes. She was only watching for a moment before another man stabbed him through with his blade. When he fell, she screamed and killed every man on the battlefield with her mournful cries. They were so loud they split her own throat and killed all save for the man she loved. The gods called from the heavens and begged her to return before she caused more damage. She loved the man too much to let him go and crawled to him desperately. The gods kept calling to her, but she knew in her heart that she could save him."

Hiccup stared at Rose with widened eyes as Rose looked over the waves again.

"She kissed his wounds with her lips wet with the blood from her split throat and there was a sickening crash. The man's wounds closed, but the gate between the gods and the dragons slammed shut. She looked up and could no longer hear the gods' messages to tell man. She was cursed to live on earth with her lover, giving up her magic to protect him through all eternity. She had healed him, but sacrificed all that she was. Heartbroken, she looked down and found her lover had turned into a dragon, only mortal and smaller than herself. Together, they created all the dragons we know of today, and each of them inherited the dragon mother's bond, all because of her sacrifice."

Rose closed her eyes slowly and took another deep breath.

"It's just a story, I like to tell myself," she continued, "but Skyripper used this story as inspiration and it worked. When I came crawling into his cell accidentally, he could smell our shared blood. He knew who you were and what you represented: freedom. At first, he tried to kiss my wounds the way the dragon mother had done, but Skyripper has a violent tone to him, so he bit me. Severely."

She pulled the furs and shirt off her shoulder to remind Hiccup of the scar he was too familiar with. He knew the jagged flesh and pearly marks ran from her shoulder down her back.

"He saved my life, but not without sacrifice. For the gods, there can never be nothing. There always has to be something. So if Skyripper was taking me out of Valhalla's reach, he had to put something of himself in my stead. It created a bond between us that made us stronger, but something broke within him. He became more violent, bloodthirsty. Never towards me, butâ€|"

Rose chose not to continue. Hiccup wanted to put a hand on her shoulder, anything, but he couldn't. He watched her pull her furs back over her shoulder as she gave a small shiver.

"With you, and with Astrid, I had to make similar sacrifices," she said.

"What?" Hiccup asked, sadness inexplicably growing within his chest.

"Between men and dragons, there are four parts of an individual we share." She counted on her fingers one by one. "We all have minds and bodies. Those are the most obvious traits. Beyond that, there are souls and spirits. Commonly mistaken as the same thing, and hard to explain. Like, your soul is what you are and your spirit is how you feel. There are many interpretations."

Hiccup felt his heart cramp painfully, but he kept his eyes fixed on his sister.

"I tried to bond you to Toothless without making a sacrifice, and you almost died for it," she murmured. "So before I left, I focused my entire being into creating this bond. Being vulnerable like that made it possible for the gods to reach out and pluck something of mine in order to leave you be. It fragmented my being."

Hiccup's mouth went dry as the grass around them as he saw tears bead in Rose's eyes.

"I don't regret saving you that night. It has saved your life more times than you would like to admit, and that's what I would expect from such an insurmountable gift. But then there was Astrid. I thought the poison would either target you or our father; both of you could hold off the effects longer than her, whether it be your bond or Stoick's body mass. I never told you how close she was to Valhalla, Hiccup. I neverâ€| I saw what she saw as she faded â€" the endless sky of stars and voices â€" but somehow, I pulled her back."

"What did that do to you?" Hiccup dared to ask.

"There was another fragmentation," she answered quietly. "Astrid was so far in death that I had to give more in order to save her. Two parts of my being went in her place, hovering in limbo until I die to appease the gods."

"So three of your four aspectsâ€| are broken?" Hiccup asked.

"That's why I cannot save our father," Rose replied. "There is

nothing I want more than to have him hear me, believe me that I am his daughter. I spent my entire life fighting to get here, to get to you and him, and he can't hear me. He may never wake up. If I were to bond him to another dragon, it would fragment the fourth and final part of myself. You have my spirit. Astrid has my soul and my mind. I only have my body intact, and yetâ€¢!"

She brought her hand to her lips and felt her gums. When she pulled her hand away, a streak of blood painted her fingertip. "This should have healed within seconds. This is partly why I was still severely injured when you found me. I can no longer heal as quickly as I used to. Such are the prices my dragon name comes withâ€¢! Spirit Weaver."

The bloody noses, the bruises on her hands, the waning energyâ€¢ all clear to Hiccup within a single second. He didn't want to believe it, and it seemed impossible to believe, but he couldn't ignore the explanations screaming in his ears. He reached forward and gently grasped Rose's hand, giving it a squeeze. Rose shuddered and swallowed her sadness and fear away, clutching onto Hiccup as if for dear life.

"'Tis a fickle thing when one plays with things she does not quite understand," she admitted. "But I regret nothing, so long as you save her without dying yourself."

She gave Hiccup a smile and sat in the field in silence, looking over the ocean as the sun slowly set behind the waves.

Night fell over Berk quickly, and most went to bed early to beat the cold. Most were nestled in the treetops in their small treehouses, reinforced with furs and small cauldrons of fire to protect the villagers from frostbite. Most slept easily; reestablishing the village in these bizarre ways paired with caring and training hundreds of new wild dragons took the life out of everyone each day. Everyone slept that night.

* * *

><p>In the darkness, a figure moved. Slinking under the shadow of complete black, it snuck out of the Great Hall. It slowly and carefully made its way down the hill from the Hall towards the Hangar. It knew there were only two people on watch: one in the sky and one on top of the Great Hall overlooking everything. It knew they wouldn't be able to see it sneak into the Hangar like a little snake. A small bag of items, three layers of clothing, a blanket, and food and water. It was almost too heavy for it to carry, but it wouldn't give up.</p>

The shadowy figure wriggled through a small gap in the Hangar's structure, and it quietly stepped around the slumbering dragons towards Stormfly. The Nadder wasn't sleeping either, and it looked at the figure intensely.

"I packed what I can carry," Snowdrop whispered. "Let's go find my sister."

Sorry for the wait! End of semester blues, but we're back! Hope everyone else is doing well in the world. Much love!

* * *

><p>Chapter Thirty-Four: The Pit**

One of the things Astrid hated the most about the Hatchery, next to the abysmal conditions, was the screaming within the tiny fire rooms. Fabric wrapped around her hands tightly, she picked up the Gronckle egg in her hands and turned it. The skin on her cheekbones and nose and lips had blistered long ago, and the rags had caught fire twice since she started hours before. The fire rooms were the most hated area to work in the Hatch, and that was partially due to the high and literal burn-out rate. If you didn't faint from the heat within the first few minutes, the pain would throw you out soon enough.

Astrid wiped the sweat out of her eyes as she moved to another egg, turning it against the stone. Gronckle shells were coated with a rock-like finish and it ground against the bottom, making a terrible crunching noise. And the eggs in Astrid arms were heavy. Too heavy to bear. She grunted and wheezed as she twisted her body to turn the egg.

Set, she leaned against the egg, wincing as her hands burned and yet not strong enough to leave the support of it. She peeled open her eyes only slightly — anymore and the heat would sear her eyes again — and looked at all twenty-two eggs with a heavy weight in her stomach. None of them would hatch. Not a single egg — Gronckle, Cauldron, Terror, Thunderdrum, even Whispering Deaths — none of them would hatch.

Astrid groaned and left the room, feeling the walls to guide her way out. She sucked in the cool air of the Hatch and sighed deeply, rolling her shoulders and clearing her parched throat. Her eyes adjusted and she felt them twitch as the thin layer in front of her vision healed. She shuddered, not used to the bond's benefits. She blinked and looked across to Valka, who gave some of her soldiers a collection of orders before catching Astrid's eye. She waved the soldiers off and they departed towards the cages containing the mother dragons, disappearing down a corridor. She made her way to Astrid and had a harsh look on her face — her Birdsong face — but her voice was soft.

"You've been in there for hours," Valka said, looking around. She subtly handed Astrid her water skin. Astrid looked for onlookers before quickly drinking the entire contents of the bottle before handing it back to her.

Valka grabbed Astrid's wrist and pulled the rags around her palms back. She watched for a few seconds as the blisters burst and slowly healed, like a Snaptrapper slowly opening and closing their mouths in a morning rain. Valka pulled the rags over her palms once more and Astrid closed her hands into fists, stifling a groan and squeezing her eyes shut.

"How are the eggs?" Valka continued.

"Unchanged," Astrid replied quietly. "None have hatched, or even moved. They're full, they're in there, but they just won't

hatch."

"Have any turned?"

"You mean die?" Astrid asked. "Noâ€œ; they just sit there."

Two weeks of nothing, Valka reminded herself. Two weeks of sending poor souls into the egg rooms, sacrificing flesh and bone to the creatures, and yet nothing.

"You've been spending a lot of time in those rooms," Valka noted. "A lot of time to think about our discussion?"

Astrid winced again, twisting her hand around to stretch her aching wrists. She had been avoiding the topic ever since it had been brought up. A revolution, to fill in the tiny and yet huge boots Rose left in her wake. "I don't know," she mumbled.

Valka chewed her lip for a moment and stepped in closer. She lowered her voice. "What do I have to do to convince you? Seeing Hiccup is not enough?"

Astrid growled. "It's not that. There's more to this situation than him and I. A quarter of my village is here. Generations of people are here. I can't just commit to something blindly, and without my strength, if I risk losing everything."

Valka shook her head. "It's not blind, it's spitting all of us in the face. I don't like this structure â€œ; have you ever thought to take a closer look at the the walls? How they're worn down, how this enormous monolith of a 'sanctuary' wasâ€œ; built? I don't know about you, but I certainly haven't heard of Alvin's brigade of master builders or Dagur's magnificent diggers."

Astrid furrowed her brow and looked across to the smoothed walls, the arched doors, the pits grooved into the earth.

A scream broke the two women from their reverie and Valka turned almost too calmly. Astrid's neck tensed painfully as a huge shadow lumbered from the caverns that led to the cages. The massive body of the beast practically collapsed into the light of the torches and Valka looked upon it distastefully.

Astrid, meanwhile, marvelled at the colossal dragon. A magnificent creature with purplish, shiny skin covered in deep scars and welts, cuts, and defined muscle. The harness wrapped around the beast's mouth over and over, digging into his sore flesh and making his aggression rise dangerously. His wings were pinned to his body with even more chains, and the sound the mateł made when it scraped along the stone ground made Astrid's teeth clench.

"That's not a dragon mother," Astrid breathed.

"No, it's one of our males," Valka replied. "The most extraordinary Skrill man has ever seen. Or he was... before Dagur got his hands on him."

The Skrill's laboured breaths rocked the Hatch as Valka's face went stern.

"He was mating with our females?" Astrid asked as her eyes nervously flicked over the details of the Skrill's muscular body. "We have a female Skrill?"

"Nay, Wildling. This is no breeding dragon. This is a Pit dragon."

Astrid didn't have time to ask before Valka waved over to the soldiers reigning the monster in. It drooled all over the stone, its legs weak and its eyes searching frantically. "Hurry up, I want this thing out of my Hatch!" she ordered.

"Wait, Birdsong, what is going on?"

"I'm sure if you wanted to find out, you'd find out," Valka replied quietly. "Are you deaf?" she yelled to the soldiers. "Move!"

Astrid watched Valka give her a look over her shoulder before she escorted the huge troop of men and the dragon out of the room, followed by a few shaken and disturbed men and women who murmured to each other. One of the men who peeked from one of the egg rooms had a quivering lip. He shook his head and ducked into the room.

Astrid cursed under her breath and followed them, a burning feeling entering her gut with every step. She kept her head down as she tried to catch up to the party. The feat wasn't terribly difficult as the dragon was lumbering slowly. The crowds in the main cavern parted, and Astrid followed warily, weaving through the crowd as she untied the rags around her hands and wrapped them around her head to conceal her hair. She followed closely behind with her shoulders back and her head facing the floor and no one questioned her as she slipped behind soldiers and weaved around the residents of the Underground, keeping close to the wall. They made their way to the gate blocking off a passage that lead to the Sun Sap pools and the miners.

"Open the gate!"

"Make way!"

"Everyone back up!"

Astrid paused as the crowd thickened, trying to back away from the beast and the soldiers and being trapped by the walls that closed around them. Astrid wriggled between them and made it to the edge of the gate just before the Skrill entered. It paused and growled at Astrid, one eye looking straight at her.

Astrid, struck pale and frozen in place, only stared. The voice of the Skrill, so powerful and alarming, and it slithered up her body like ice water.

Youâ€| comeâ€| see.

She only blinked as the soldiers kicked the beast in the legs.

"What is going on?!" Valka barked. "Get him in there!"

Hurry, Harbinger, it roared. _Come see the story of my wounds. I have been waiting. Waiting._

The dragon began to thrash against its chains, causing a stir as everyone leaped back. Astrid sucked in a breath and ducked under one of his clawed hands, rushing through the gate and running down the hall. She skidded to a halt and hid behind one of the natural pillars, sucking in a breath and swallowing her nausea, absorbing her surrounding areas as quick as she could.

"Where do I go?" she asked, barely above a whisper, thinking the words with a strong mind.

Up, a different dragon murmured. There are stairs, climb them.

There was no time to dwell on who was speaking to her, but she continued to run, darting up the flight of stairs carved into the wall two at a time. She came across a row of cells, empty with a floor covered in dried blood.

Enter our confines, a third voice whispered. Come, Harbinger. Come see.

Astrid hesitated. She didn't want to enter the cell. The smell of blood made her stomach flip and her lower back ached painfully. She grabbed it and grimaced. But the sound of cheers and roars of men shattered the moment of indecisiveness.

"I want the best seat!" one of the men barked loudly, followed by a hearty laugh.

"Not if that means I'm stuck behind your fat ass!"

"If anyone is getting the best seat, it's Birdsong, am I right?" another man snorted.

"That's right," she heard Valka call. "For dealing with all of you."

Astrid covered her mouth to quiet her laboured breathing as she ran to a cell door. She heaved on it and the door swung open slowly. She pulled it closed behind her after she entered and scurried through the huge cell. She tripped over something and fell, a cry tearing out of her throat as she crashed into the floor.

"Did you hear that?" a man asked loudly.

"Hearing things again, Jorick?" Valka asked. "Move along."

"I'm sure I heard something!"

"And I'm sure I told you to move along!"

"I'm going to look," another man stated. Valka tried to argue, but the man was already on the move.

Astrid tried to get up, but the pungent smell of blood around her made her gag. The iron smell, the putrid stench of familiarity, the thick cloud of death around her. She looked at her foot and saw what she had tripped over. A body. She wasn't sure how she could tell â€“ the bond made her nose much more sensitive to the details of the type of blood that smudged against her hands â€“ but she knew it was a

human body. She covered her mouth and scrambled to all fours as she heard the man lumber up the stairs and draw his sword. She crawled into the safety of the shadows, a groove in the wall, and gasped again as the floor dropped from under her. A sharp decline sent her rolling down the hard stone. She righted herself and slid on her back the rest of the way painfully. Rocks and jagged stone bruised her back before she managed to dig her heels down. Her feet caught a small lip in the stone and she stopped her body from sliding any further.

Her legs were shaking and she kept her back pressed against the sharp incline of the floor as hundreds of voices echoed from ahead. Astrid gulped and quickly jumped to the side, pressing herself into an alcove of the wall, out of sight.

An iron gate stood between her and the voices, and she peeked around the edge of the alcove. Her lips trembled and her body throbbed and her heart pounded. But what was she looking at? She could hear voices, but she couldn't see them, as if they were above her, through the floor. She looked through the iron grid again and tried to make herself as small as possible.

A cheer roared above Astrid and the ceiling shook as what sounded like hundreds of angsty soldiers before a battle. She jumped and shrank into the floor as a chant erupted through the cheers, deafening.

"Dagur! Dagur! Dagur! Dagur! Dagur! Dagur!"

Astrid looked over again and glared as Dagur entered her view. Wearing his Berserker armour, he opened his arms, looking up into the crowd, which elicited another scream of praise and attention from his fellow tribesmen. With his arms open, Astrid could see the glint of his unscarred chest plate as if forged new out of fine silver and iron. His crest, a Skrill painted in crimson hues, flashed the audience with a taunting power, an emblem of fear and shock.

Dagur dropped his arms and revelled in the cheers, cooing to himself and shuddering, pure ecstasy running up and down his spine with each cheer and salute. Astrid swallowed again. He waved to the crowd to hush and eventually, it was quiet enough for him to yell over the crowd.

"Men! We have been holed up too long!" he cried.

The men howled in agreement. Astrid shivered and she felt fear â€“ fear of a nearby dragon â€“ enter her heart like a cold wind.

"Too long have we docked our ships, too long have we brought back the spoils of our battles! We are warriors! We are soldiers, and we need our blood!"

Dagur sneered menacingly. "Berk has fallen. Berk and her allies have all fallen. Dragon lovers. The gods did not give us iron and steel to be friends with such beasts! No! This is our land, this is our world, and dragons have no part in our heroic tales, in our battles!"

Astrid sucked in a breath as she looked behind Dagur to the tall walls, the scratch marks up the sides.

Solve the riddle, Harbinger, she heard the Skrill growl in her head, the echoes of chains clinking together loudly and the sounds of screaming, tortured creatures pounding in her head. _Can't you smell it? Smell the blood of hundreds of my brothers and sisters?_

Astrid's breaths came fast and shallow, and sweat beaded on her forehead. She closed her eyes and swallowed again, forcing bile and fear back into the hidden confines of herself. When she opened her eyes, she shakily peered around the corner again. She returned to the gouges in the walls, and noticed chains at the tops of the walls. They stretched overhead, where she could not see, but she recognized the cage-like netting.

The Pit was an arena, she noticed with a horrifying pang. The Pit was an arena, and it was not like the arena back at home. This was like the old arena, an arena for fighting and killing.

"Berk believes there is a way," Dagur continued, seething, "that you can train a dragon with love." He spat in disgust. "Is that how we treat our dogs? Our women? No. If we are to train these dragons, it's with discipline! Bring forth Thorvane! Let us see what a real dragon is!"

Astrid watched as a gate opened from an unseen area of the arena. But the crowd went absolutely wild as the giant Skrill lumbered into Astrid's view. The troops, with Valka's help, quickly unlocked the chains around his muzzle and ran off, shutting the gate behind them. The Skrill roared a terrible, distorted bellow that sounded unlike any beast Astrid had heard. Like someone had taken jagged metal and hacked away at his throat. Scars criss-crossed his entire body and even fresh wounds glinted in the torchlight.

"Hiccup would have told you that a Skrill cannot be tamed!" Dagur screamed as the Skrill slowly bowed before him. "But he was wrong! And now he and his dragon-loving curs are dead."

He grinned and turned, his back facing Astrid. He motioned to the top of the arena where the audience was seated. The crowd parted and a handful of Berkians were shoved to the front, scared and clutching to each other. Astrid paled and squeaked at the sight of people she knew — people she bought bread from, people who were at her parents' wake, mothers and fathers of some of the Dragonlings she taught — and she struggled to watch as their frail bodies were shoved through the wide holes in the chain webbing. They tumbled into the arena and landed painfully. One woman fell and her ankle shattered under her weight. Her screams made Astrid hide for a moment as angry, hate-filled tears spilled down her face.

How can you still need convincing to fight when this is happening to your people? the Skrill growled, his head still bowed.

Astrid forced herself to look again. The Berkian woman's husband tried to lift her, but her mangled leg made her howl out. One man didn't move — he must have landed on his head — and blood trickled from it into the stone.

"Hear how they cry! Hear how they beg for their lives! Begging for mercy with their love," Dagur continued, looking at the Berkians

suffering, trying to help each other. "These people believe Hiccup is alive! They believe he's some sort of Saviour. Last I checked, no one, not even Hiccup, can rise from the dead. But their tongues have earned them front-row seats! Let's hope they enjoy them!"

Dagur threw his hand up to another gate. The soldiers above cranked the lock, lifting the bar out of the loops. The doors burst open, and a Monstrous Nightmare flew out desperately. Dagur unsheathed his longsword.

"Give these Berkians a weapon, and let's see who wins! Berkians and a Monstrous Nightmare versus Thorvane and myself. Let's see what love does for them!"

Another soldier dropped an armful of rusty swords, broken staffs, and a single shield onto the shuddering Berkians as the arena shook with cheers and bellows. She watched two men fight over the single shield, shoving each other. One man grabbed a sword, but the blade broke off the hilt at the tang. They scattered as the Monstrous Nightmare rushed to them, snapping its jaws.

"Oh no! It seems love cannot train their Nightmare!" Dagur gasped, laughing as it smashed into the Berkian woman. It closed its jaws around her head and shoulders and lifted her up, shaking her about like a rabid animal destroying a straw toy. Astrid froze, forced to look by her own terror, as blood splattered at the wall and onto the audience. The husband cried out and fell to his knees as the dragon swallowed her mangled corpse.

"No," Astrid whispered. "No. No. No, no no no. No!"

They starve us, Harbinger. They starve us until we have no choice. We cannot be picky in the Pit. We must feed, even on sacred human flesh.

Astrid slammed herself back into the alcove, curling herself into a ball, as she heard the Nightmare eat her villagers, her friends, the parents of Berkian children back home. She couldn't look, but she could feel it. She could feel the Nightmare jaggedly connecting to her mind, flashes of the familiar faces disappearing into sheets of blood, the feeling of hunger tearing through her, guilt waving over her body. She didn't want to see, she didn't want to feel, but she did through the Nightmare, and she heard as every last one of them was torn apart and gulped away.

They travel to Valhalla now. There is no more pain to endure.

"Noâ€œ!" Astrid wheezed, silent sobs shaking her to her core.

The Nightmare flicked its wild, broken eyes over to Dagur, hunger still burbling in his stomach. He was filled with craving, lust for food, and it lunged for him. Thorvane stretched out his wings and met him in the middle, and the two dragons twisted into each other violently, screaming and screeching and blood and scales flying about.

I want to lose, the Skrill admitted sourly. I would rather die. I have no lightning anymore, I have no true voice. I am broken. I want to lose.

Astrid looked back one last time. Thorvane screamed and shoved the Nightmare back, towards Dagur. And Throvane stopped, shaking and shuddering, watching as the Nightmare turned and charged towards Dagur. Dagur blinked and barely had a chance to move. And for a split second, Astrid thought this would be it. This was the end of Dagur.

But there was a loud bang, and a harpoon the width of a tree slammed through the Nightmare from above, pinning it to the ground through the neck right in front of the gate Astrid hid behind. The Nightmare struggled for a moment before catching Astrid's eyes in the darkness.

Pleaseâ€œ| it cried softly to her, before his gaze went blank. A consuming emptiness ate at Astrid's mind as she stared into the dragon's dead eyes.

No one wins in the Pit, Thorvane told Astrid. No one except Dagur.

* * *

><p>Astrid left before everyone else, running as fast as she possibly could, sobbing violently as she ran down the deserted halls. She knew of a back entrance to the Hatch â€“ a small corridor Valka took her down some nights to explore the Underground â€“ and she flew down it until she slowed, all alone. She stumbled onward, sobs echoing around her, her face drenched in sorrow. She slid down the walls, holding herself, retching and screaming and crying, pounding her fists into the floor all over again, a newfound fire blazing within her heart after weeks of isolation suffocated it.</p>

After what felt like hours, Astrid forced herself to her feet. Her body weighed her down into the earth, and she grounded herself as she looked ahead down the darkened corridor. She left it and entered one of the larger halls. As if possessed with a newfound rage, she pulled the dagger from her boot and ran the only guard patrolling the hall down, slashing open his flesh and driving the blade into the back of his head over and over again. No one noticed. No one saw. And even though she hated every second of it, the way the blood stuck to her arms and hands, she felt the tiniest pang of satisfaction. She dragged the man's body against the wall and, using his blood, wrote on the smoothed stone in huge runes.

Saviour.

* * *

><p>Astrid hid her bloody arms under her long sweater as she marched straight to Stargazer. She opened the door and rushed in, ripping her sweater off herself and throwing it into the fire. Stargazer lifted her bound head towards the sound of Astrid dragging the washbasin from under the bed.</p>

"Did you injure yourself?" she asked gently.

"No."

"You know that water is reserved for wounds?"

Astrid began scrubbing the blood away with a handful of dirty rags. "I got blood on me!" she breathed, barely a squeak. Stargazer paused her work at her table before she stood, worried. "I don't wanna say how."

"Oh dear!" Stargazer murmured. "Wildling, what?"

"I need some kind of sleeping draught. Something to put me to sleep for a day. For the rest of today until tomorrow morning. Something to shut my mind up for a moment, please, anything."

"What happened?" Stargazer interjected. "You sound agitated."

"The Pit!" Astrid cried, almost breaking the bowl. "The fucking Pit, okay! I watched I can't they fed those people my people to that thing, and it had no choice but to do it and it was the most disgusting thing I had ever."

She retched again and Stargazer quickly felt her way along the wall towards a collection of dried herbs. She grabbed a handful of them and made her way towards Astrid, who was back to sobbing. She found Astrid and leaned next to her, wrapping her arms around her, rubbing her back and her stomach.

"Hush, now," Stargazer whispered. "I I have something. It's minor, but it'll put you to sleep. It's over now. Hush. Hush."

Stargazer gently rocked Astrid as she ate the herbs sloppily, drool coating her hands, until she felt her eyes droop, dragging her down, down, and down into a quiet abyss.

* * *

><p>She prayed to all the gods as she dreamed in the dreamland that he would show. She hadn't slept deep enough to see him, to hear him and she sat against the tree rocking back and forth, praying that he would dream.<p>

"Freya, please, please gift me the presence of my husband, please show me someone is still watching over me!"

She didn't open her eyes to see Rose staring down at her, her face calm.

"They call you the Harbinger," she murmured softly. Astrid's head snapped up, and she gawked at the sight of Rose looking at her. But Rose disappeared instantly, and left her sitting, bewildered, against the tree.

But she heard the familiar squeak of a mechanical device, and she looked up as Hiccup rounded the tree slowly, confused.

"I knew there was something weird when Rose gave me that tea! she must have drugged me!"

Astrid leapt to her feet and grabbed Hiccup, who hadn't noticed her, and she shoved him up against the tree.

"Wha?" Astrid! he gasped. Astrid covered his lips with her own,

rough and desperate.

"I need you," she whimpered through her kisses. "I can't do this anymore, please" I love you, I love you.."

Saying it over and over centred her as Hiccup wrapped his arms around her body, holding her against him.

"I love you, too," he breathed against her skin.

She pulled him to the ground and over her body, begging for him to push his weight onto her, to make her feel surrounded and safe. She pulled the thin shirt from his torso and ran her hands up and down his body, which had bulked up the tiniest bit since she last felt him, and she moaned as he ran his own hands up her body.

She didn't care if this was just a dream, or if this was some kind of suspended reality. But it felt real. She felt his hands on her, his fingers, his tongue, everything she missed and craved and almost forgot about. And he relished in her scent, the softness of her hair as he tangled his fingers in it as he explored her body with the other hand, groaning with her and desperately meshing their flesh together. They held each other and rocked with each other, saying "I love you" as a mantra in the cove, growing louder and louder until the place they felt the safest shook with their voices.

Hiccup fell over Astrid, his breaths ragged, and Astrid buried her face in his shoulder. And she thanked the gods for those few moments of forgetfulness, for the moment where pure bliss and ecstasy battered away the visions of the Pit, the feeling of starvation.

"I'm gonna find you," he said, listening to fluttering of her heart beneath his flushed cheek. But when Hiccup's body left the dreamland to start another day on Berk, she stayed on her back watching the sky, her hands over her heart, and tears rolling from her eyes and into her hair.

35. Something Found, Something Lost

Hello, everyone! Happy Holidays from Western Canada! I hope everyone is having an enjoyable time, no matter where you are or what you celebrate. I took a few extra days to write an extra-long chappie here for the occasion. I hope you enjoy it. Special shout-out to Foxes-rocks, who created a dedication music video for some of their favourite HTTYD FF writers. Hopefully, we can sort a way to link it for those who would like to see it. I myself loved it! _

* * *

><p>Chapter Thirty-Five: Something Found, Something Lost

Rose crouched in silence, staring ahead without a blink or a tremble. She was crouched under the frost-bitten trees, her side pressed against the low trunk of an evergreen and slowed her breaths. Her fingers tightened around the bow string, an arrow nocked into place. There was an elk " a small one, but enough to feed at least a few people " nibbling at a scant patch of frozen moss. She would use

the fur for a blanket for a few of the children, the meat for the people, the sinew for Hiccup, the bones for Gothi. The antlers had not yet been shed, and she knew someone would like to have them back in the village.

She took a deep breath and pulled the string back, pulling it taught and resting it right next to her cheek. Her arm, out straight and true, trembled only slightly, before she released. The arrow flew forward and hit the elk in the neck, making it scream painfully. Rose pulled her bow over her head and shoulder and sprinted forward, taking one, two, three, four long steps before she was on top of it, driving her dagger into its throat. It fell silent, and settled into the frozen earth with a final breath.

I could have caught it for you, the Changewing said as it slithered from behind.

"You would have scared it away, Stingbreath," Rose retorted as she pulled her knife free, cleaning it with some more moss. Stingbreath sniffed at the corpse and shied away slightly.

You are a Spirit Weaver. You do not take spirits away.

"I can still hunt for my people," Rose replied, resting a comforting hand on the Changewing's head, running it down her neck soothingly. "I will pray for this creature, and thank it for the resources, all of which we'll use until nothing is left."

I don't like it. Why can't you fish, instead?

"Fish are animals just like this elk," Rose snorted.

Fish are stupid animals whose purpose are to feed bigger creatures like myself and you.

"Just like this elk, then."

Stingbreath growled in frustration and shook her head about angrily. You humans are so frustrating.

Rose laughed and grabbed her rope from the saddle upon Stingbreath's back and tied the elk's legs. Together, they pulled the elk onto the dragon's back and Rose clambered up in front of it. She wrapped her furs around her tightly and urged Stingbreath into the air above the trees. Once they left the forest, Rose leaned back against the elk's body and she looked around herself, calm.

She yawned as she watched the first rays of the sun kiss the clouds as it ascended over the horizon. After seeing Astrid in the dreamland, she left and brought Hiccup some tea, potent in sleeping remedies. She didn't go back to sleep after that; she wanted to give Hiccup and Astrid some privacy. Having the same dreamland between the three of them certainly made things a lot more complicated.

Harbinger. Rose pondered Astrid's name carefully, asking herself questions in her mind.

The bringer of something, Stingbreath told her. Like frost before winter. An omen.

"Well, that's terribly vague."

The names we have given you, the Saviour, and the Harbinger are sacred and agreed upon, often influenced by the gods themselves. And what do we get in return? Pet names.

"I think Stingbreath is a lovely name," Rose argued.

Pah! Your name has layers upon layers of spirituality and meaning, for the past, present, and the future. Mine relays the fact I spit poison. The magnificence astounds me, I can hardly contain myself.

"Easy, girl. Save it for the fight."

Stingbreath went silent in her mind as Rose suppressed a smile. Soon, she told herself, soon they would be able to fly and find the others and bring Astrid home. Then they could be together as a family. Her smile, however, faltered at the thought. What about Stoick? What if he never woke up? She pursed her lips and shook her head, shaking it from her mind. She had to stay hopeful, for everyone. He would be fine. She had to believe it.

They flew on, eventually landing outside the Great Hall. Everyone was barely stirring in their treehouses and huts in the forest, and Rose was about to dismount without a worry before Stingbreath growled, making her freeze.

The door is openâ€| and the lookout is sleeping.

Rose's eyes flicked up to the Great Hall doors, and they were indeed ajar, only slightly. But they were to remain closed, no exceptions, until sunlight kissed the wood, and the sun had not yet risen that far.

"Stay close," Rose whispered as she unsheathed her knife again. Rose carefully scaled the steps, one at a time, before she slinked through the doors. She stayed close to the wall, slowly approaching the conference chamber where Snowdrop and Stoick slept. She looked around herself and everyone too ill to stay in the forest was sleeping. The matrons were sleeping alongside the ill, and not one bed was empty.

Rose entered the conference room and found the oil lamp in the dark. She twisted the dial on it a touch to illuminate the room, just enough to make sure Snowdrop and Stoick were alright. And when the light of the flame illuminated the room, she stared confused for a moment, before a terrible shriek escaped her throat so loud, everyone in the Great Hall startled awake.

* * *

><p>"I'm gonna find you," Hiccup breathed, trying to catch his breath. His cheek, sticking to Astrid's bare breast, was so wonderfully warm, so familiar. He had so much to tell her â€" about fixing Stormfly's wing to a degree, about the village, about Rose â€" but he wanted to wait. Here, he could breathe, and breathe in the scent of his wife, as she cradled his head against her chest.<p>

But the suspension within the dreamland was cut short. Suddenly, his cheek was no longer clinging to Astrid's skin. He stirred reluctantly as his body was dragged back to Berk. He peeled open his eyes, still drowsy from the tea Rose had given him the night before. His cheeks were still flushed, a cold spot upon the side of his face where Astrid used to be. His hair clung to his forehead under a sheen of sweat, as if his body was truly spent. His legs were trembling and he struggled to sit up slightly upon his elbows. He groaned, rubbing the sweat out of his eyes, slowly realizing the cold within the air around him.

Wake up! he heard Toothless cry in his head. It was muffled, sleep still ebbing away from Hiccup. _Get up!_

"Huh? What?" he slurred. The house rocked as if something banged against the trunk below.

He looked around his makeshift treehouse and threw his furs off himself. He crawled from his straw mattress and stumbled towards the door. He poked his head out and squinted against the sunlight.

Toothless was at the bottom of the tree, pushing into it over and over again, cooing and grunting loudly. _Come down!_

"Bud, what's going on?" Hiccup asked with a frown. Suddenly, Stingbreath swooped overhead and Rose jumped down. Her hair in all directions, her tears frozen to her terrified face. She grabbed Hiccup by the shoulders and he grabbed hers in response. She could barely breathe, her face pale and red all at once, as if she had been running for her life.

"Someone broke into the Great Hall!" she wheezed. Hiccup's eyes widened, all thoughts of Astrid aside.

"What do you mean?" he asked quickly.

"I was out this morning," she gasped, frantic and shrill, "and when I returned, the doors were open and the lookout was asleep and I went into the conference room and â€“ and â€“ oh gods, I can't breathe â€“"

Hiccup gave her a shake, his own heart jumping in his chest. "I need you to tell me the rest. Please, take a deep breath and tell me what â€“"

"It's our dad!" she cried. "Stoick is gone!"

Hiccup blinked, his heart stopping in his chest. "Wait, what? No. No, oh gods."

"He's gone!" Rose repeated with a sob.

"When?" Hiccup choked. "When?"

Rose pulled back, throwing her hands about like a child swatting away a spark of fire. "What? I don't know! All I know is we have to find him!"

Hiccup's mouth fell open. "You mean, he's missing?!"

"What did you think I meant?"

"Well, dead! I thought you meant he died!"

"Hiccup, Stoick's bed is empty either way! Someone took him!"

The next thing he knew, he was on Toothless' back, the two of them flying as fast as they could to the Great Hall. He landed sloppily, sprinting up the steps two at a time, stumbling over his leg, which had loosened in his sleep. He threw the doors open and shoved past the matrons, who were all running about trying to figure out where Stoick had been taken, and how.

"Who was on lookout?!" he yelled as he shoved past the scared villagers.

"Hiccup, let me explain" Tuffnut replied, holding his arms up. Hiccup grabbed Tuffnut's shirt and pulled him around violently, glaring into his scared eyes. "Ow, be careful! Chest wound, chest wound!"

"Did you fall asleep at your post?!"

"No, I swear, I" "

Hiccup shook him roughly again. "Tell me the truth!"

"I am! Gods!"

Tuffnut shoved Hiccup away as he rubbed his chest, grimacing. "I didn't sleep at all, actually. And I already checked in with the lookout in the air, and they didn't see anything, either."

"You were sleeping when I got here," Rose cried, shoving past Hiccup and shoving her finger in her face. "You liar!"

"Well, yeah, I dozed off for only a few moments but" "

Rose grabbed him this time. "I swear to the gods, if this is your fault" "

"The door can't be opened from the outside!" Tuffnut replied. "Not without making a loud noise, which would have woken me up, dozing or otherwise! The door was opened from the inside."

"Stoick was under Whispering Death venom for months!" Rose shrieked. "You're telling me he woke up and just left?!"

"Hiccup!"

Everyone turned as Gobber ran in, barely able to catch his breath. Hiccup and Rose both let go of Tuffnut as they shaved their way through the crowd to Gobber at the door.

"Stoick is missing, someone took him in the night," Hiccup told him immediately. "I want people in the air, I want all our tracking dragons geared up and ready to ride, and I want anyone without proper riding training on foot" they can't have gone far in the past hour or so."

"Now wait just a moment," Gobber gasped through exhausted breaths. "Everyone just calm down!"

"We need to find him!" Hiccup yelled. Gobber grabbed him with one arm and twisted him around so both of them were no longer facing the prying eyes of the worried and confused villagers. And they looked down the steps of the hall down the road to the abandoned wreckage of the village before the Battle of Berk, and Hiccup found himself growing very, very numb as Gobber whispered in his ear. Then, his cheeks flushed a blazing red. He turned to the villagers and raised his hands.

"Everyoneâ€| go inside. Gobber, go get Snotlout, Tuff, Fishlegs, Juniperâ€| and a blanket."

Rose rushed over. "What? What did you see â€" "

"I'll go ahead," Hiccup said. "Justâ€| give me a moment."

Toothless gingerly paused in front of Hiccup so he could mount him, and with his upon his back, Toothless slowly walked down the steps and back towards the village. Toothless snuffed at the ground as Hiccup looked around the rubble, keeping his eye out for any signs of movement.

"Dad?" he called out gently. "Dad?"

Toothless snorted at the ground loudly and turned, walking faster towards the forge. As they approached, they heard something clang with metal, like swords being knocked over. Hiccup cautiously dismounted and slowly walked towards the building, licking his lips. His heart raced in his chest and he swallowed as he called one more time.

"Dad? Are you in there?"

A shadow moved in the door, and there was a slurred sound, like a grunt or groan.

"Hicâ€|Hiccup?"

Stoick stumbled towards the door of the forge, a rusty sword in hand, and he squinted in the light. Hiccup watched, his hands out. He looked to the sword, and looked back to his dad's face. His eyes trailed up and he had to suppress a smile; Snowdrop, in her time protecting Stoick's resting body, had tied an exotic andâ€| creative assortment of bows and ribbons in his hair, making his frizzy hair poke up and out around the top of his head like a crown. His nightgown hung off one starved shoulder, and the back hung open so his bare backside suffered the cold of the morning.

"Whaâ€| what happened?"

Hiccup trembled as tears began prickling at his eyes. The sound of his father's voice made his heart lift for the first time in what felt like aeons. "You woke up."

"To my villageâ€| " he breathed, looking about quickly. "Where are the houses? The people?"

Hiccup took a step towards him. "A lot happened since the attack. Come, let's go!"

"Wait!" Stoick rasped, furrowing his brows. "Astrid! Alvin!"

Hiccup nodded, taking another step. "Alvin took many people but we're going to get them back. Come out of the forge."

The small party Hiccup had requested flew down and landed behind Hiccup, making Stoick jump and frown, holding up his sword sloppily.

"Easy, dad, it's just some riders," Hiccup said, closing the distance between them. He reached behind his father's back and closed his nightgown, covering his back and rump. "Do you remember them?"

Stoick scoffed. "I'm weak, not senile. I remember them all."

Juniper rushed over from the back of Meatlug and threw a large fur over Stoick's back. He shivered as she grabbed his arm and began leading him towards the pack of dragons, who looked upon him timidly. "We have to get you back to the hall, Stoick, you'll freeze."

"I'm fine," he grunted. "No! There! There was something I was looking for!"

He tried to move away back into the forge, but Hiccup and Juniper stopped him. But when they asked him what it was he was searching for, he couldn't respond. He would frown and grumble and shake his head, but it would not come back to his mind. They pulled him towards Toothless and helped him into the saddle. They walked back towards the hall, where Gobber was desperately trying to keep the villagers inside, to avoid prying eyes. They respectfully made a path for Toothless to carry Stoick and Hiccup back to the conference room. Juniper shut the door behind them, leaving Hiccup sitting at the side of the bed, watching as Stoick wriggled uncomfortably in his bed. Juniper sent for food, fresh food, and attended him as he looked over to Hiccup with a confused and tired look upon his features.

"When do you plan to rebuild the village?" he asked sleepily. "You haven't been able to clear away the rubble in the past few days?"

"Days?" Hiccup replied. "Dad! You've been asleep for weeks. Moons! Over two moons!"

Stoick paused and looked down upon himself, looking at the backs of his hands.

"My fingers are sticks," he slurred. Hiccup chuckled as he reached over and took one of Stoick's hands. "If it's been moons, why haven't you rebuilt the village? Refortified the island?"

"Well, I have," Hiccup replied.

He continued to explain to Stoick about how he rebuilt the village, but in the nearby forest. Treehouses and huts made Stoick blink and

raise his eyebrows, nodding slowly as Hiccup continued. And when Hiccup told Stoick about the Hangar, and how it took a single moon to erect it for the wild dragons, he smiled a loose smile and gave Hiccup's hand a gentle squeeze.

"You've grown. Don't know how," Stoick sighed hoarsely after taking a sip of water, "but you knowâ€¢ you're thicker."

"Cauli's been doing her rounds on me," Hiccup sighed. "Trying to fatten me up before we fly in."

"Not likely, if I couldn't do it with your mother's cooking, she can't do it either."

Hiccup paused and pursed his lips. Mum. He didn't know about Rose, he remembered.

"When do we fly in?" Stoick grunted.

"You are not flying anywhere," Juniper piped in. "Not with you in your state."

"C'mon, woman, I've been asleep for ages."

"No," Juniper repeated.

"We haven't set a definitive plan," Hiccup admitted, jumping over Stoick before he could speak. "It's a complicated situation. We need more people, but there's no where to go. Alvin wiped out the alliance, the remaining are here. And we have more dragons than we can count, but it too doesn't feel like enough."

"It never feels like enough, son," Stoick sighed. "When I lost your mother, sailing after her was futile. I never had enough food or water on the boats, never enough men to support the cause long enough to pursue it fully. And now I've lost her forever."

Hiccup swallowed painfully and, as if on cue, Rose entered the room slowly, carrying a bowl of stew, made with the fresh elk she shot earlier. He looked to Stoick with wide eyes as she slowly approached the table. Juniper was quick to swoop in, trying to grab the bowl of stew.

"Thank you, Rose, you can leave now â€¢"

"Juniper," Hiccup said, making Juniper stop before she touched the wooden bowl.

Rose looked over Juniper's shoulder to Hiccup, her eyes red, as Juniper pursed her lips and took her leave, returning to Stoick's side silently. Stoick looked between Hiccup and Rose, his eyes wondering.

"You remember Rose?" Hiccup asked Stoick quietly. He motioned for Rose to come closer with a welcome arm, which made Stoick grunt in disapproval.

"I remember Rose, yes. The girl you plucked off Outcast Island, who gifted the bond to you and Astrid, whom, I must remind you, is your loving wife."

"Hiccup and I are not involved," Rose was quick to say. "I'm not here for him. I'm" I'm "

In a rare turn of events, she wasn't sure what to say. She stood there in front of her father, clutching the bowl of soup she had made the way her mother had taught her.

"Dad, thisâ€| is going to be hard to believe," Hiccup admitted carefully. He pulled himself from the chair and onto the bed, sitting by Stoick's thin legs. Stoick looked between the two of them over and over, trying to figure it out as Hiccup tried to find the right words. "Rose?"

Stoick's eye twitched as Rose licked her lips. "Ummâ€| well. Iâ€| "

"Rose knows mum is alive," Hiccup blurted. Stoick looked over and Juniper almost dropped the extra blanket from the corner. Rose nodded, going along with it.

"She's alive, Stoick," Rose repeated. "She still fights, she was still alive the last time I saw her."

Stoick didn't move. But he looked to Hiccup who nodded, and Stoick looked back up to Rose. It was as if he didn't know whether it was easier to accept it or deny it.

"Alvin has her? After all these years?"

"Yes," Rose confirmed, her voice shaking. "She convinced him to keep her alive. And me."

Juniper looked between Stoick and Rose, and suddenly, she dropped the blanket on the floor and covered her mouth. Everyone looked over as she pointed between Stoick and Rose. Hiccup's jaw dropped.

"Juniper, before mum was taken, did she see you for anything?"

Juniper clamped her mouth shut, her cheeks growing red. Stoick sat up slightly.

"Would someone tell me why Juniper is having a fit?" he asked grumpily.

"She was pregnant when she was taken," Rose stammered in a flurry. "Juniper was the only one who knew."

Stoick looked at Rose, his eyes bigger than his fists before his slumber. "_What_?!"

"It was early," Juniper concurred. "Hardly showing, after the trouble we had with Hiccup, she wanted to keep it secret until she knew for sure it had stuck."

Stoick reached out and grabbed Rose's hand. "This child â€" did she have it? Did it stick?"

"It did," Rose replied, tears filling her eyes.

"No, don't cry, tell me they're alright, too," Stoick begged, his voice breaking.

"The child is fine, dad," Hiccup said. "And no longer a child," he said, a tear falling down his cheek, smiling up at Rose as she squeezed Stoick's hands.

"Hi," Rose said through a large smile and a loud sniffle. "I've been wanting to meet you my whole life."

Stoick squinted at her for a single second before his own jaw dropped. "Wait â€“ you?"

Rose nodded, and Stoick stared at her, looking to Hiccup as tears filled his own eyes. Soon, everyone in the room was wiping tears from their eyes as Stoick stared up at Rose.

"Valka always wanted a daughter," he whispered, breaking down into sobs. "Oh â€“ oh gods â€“"

Hiccup and Rose sat on the bed, holding him as he held his two children, and he rocked them both as Juniper covered her mouth with one hand, smiling.

"This is a lot to take in," Stoick hiccuped through sobs. "Butâ€œ! godsâ€œ! I always wanted another child, and you look just like her."

Hiccup nodded and wiped his tears away with a fist, nodding. "No one knows about this, we wanted you to be the first."

Stoick smiled again and refused to let them go, trying to crush them with his weak arms. "What a morning!" he laughed with a wheeze and a cough. But then he faltered and pulled away, grabbing both of Rose's arms, his face serious.

"I'm soâ€œ! so sorry about how I treated you," he murmured, as if recollecting on the spot. "When you bonded Astrid, I thought â€“"

"It's okay," Rose was quick to say. After the village thought Rose had killed Astrid, Stoick interrogated Rose forcefully. But Rose would rather move on from that, already knowing he had his reasons, and he had no idea of who she actually was. Remembering, though, was not easy for Rose. It never was.

There was a knock on the door, and Juniper jumped, rushing over. She opened it and one of her matrons began speaking to her in hushed voices. Stoick, Rose, and Hiccup all looked over, wondering why Juniper's face shifted from happiness to confusion.

"What do you mean she's not in the Hangar?" she asked her matron.

"I went to collect her myself, but she's not there."

"She may have gone to Gothi's, then, check there."

"I already did. But â€“"

Hiccup stood. "Is everything alright?" he asked. Juniper didn't turn at first, and Rose stood next to Hiccup, glaring over at the matrons.

"Did Snowdrop spend the night with you?" Juniper asked Hiccup nonchalantly over one of her shoulders. Hiccup shook his head and Rose looked over to Snowdrop's empty bed.

"Did you check the Hangar?" Rose asked.

"Wait!" Stoick grunted, waving to Rose and Hiccup. "I was â€“ I was looking for something â€“"

Rose sat down again, placing a hand on Stoick's leg. "What is it?"

"I was about to wake up, I could feel it, but then I heard Snowdrop â€“ I heard her speaking to me as I came to," Stoick began, squeezing his eyes shut so he could remember clearer. "Sheâ€¦ she was goingâ€¦"

"Going where?" Hiccup asked. Rose was about to back Hiccup up when she paused, her eyes going vacant.

"Waitâ€¦" she whispered shakily.

"Snowdrop wasâ€¦ leaving," Stoick finished. "It was her I was trying to find â€“"

"Stormfly is gone," Rose gasped, snapping back to her own mind. "The dragons saw them leave together hours ago. They're going after Astrid â€“"

"We have to go after her," Hiccup said immediately.

"She's gone beyond my range," Rose argued stopping him from the door.

"That's not going to stop me," Hiccup growled, grabbing Rose's hand and pushing it away from his arm. "We have to find her before she finds them. If they see Stormfly's wing, they'll know I built it, and even then, it won't keep them in the air! I can leave the village to Gobber and dad for a day or two. But you and I are going. Now."

Hiccup and Rose left the hall as fast as they could, shoving past people who tried to stop them. Toothless and Stingbreath met them on the steps and soared off the cliff. They searched for hours, turning this way and that, never taking a break as the sun rose and hung high in the air behind a thick sheet of storm clouds. But no matter where they went, there was no sign of Snowdrop. There was no sign of Stormfly. There was nothing but chunks of ice floating atop a swelling sea, growing restless as the stormy season crept towards Berk.

We have to go back, Toothless panted, tired and weak. _We should continue the search tomorrow._

Hiccup looked onward over the water, his hands clenched into fists around the reins. Tears had frozen over his cheeks long ago. He had

already screamed his voice away trying to find her, visions of finding her body in the ocean in the back of his mind.

"There won't be a search tomorrow," Hiccup barely uttered.

He had gained his father back, the one person he had wanted to talk to over these past two moons. And yet, he had lost everything all over. Astrid's life, her entire being encompassed in Snowdrop's chubby cheeks, her unruly blonde curls, her eyes identical to hers. And she was gone. There was no way Hiccup's wing would last the night. He knew that. The damned blueprints had always told him that. He wanted to hurt himself, knowing he had put that thing on Stormfly, knowing it wasn't ready.

They had no choice but to turn back. They returned long after night fell to a sombre village. And when Hiccup stiffly dismounted without saying a word, the village bowed their heads as Hiccup climbed the steps of the Great Hall, parting the crowd as they went, offering hushed words of empty comforts and sympathies. And Hiccup nodded to most until he reached the top of the steps, where Stoick stood propped up by Gobber and Juniper.

Stoick knew. He still asked if they found anything, and Hiccup shook his head. Stoick's eyes filled with tears once more as he reached forward to his son with one arm, embracing him for a long moment in front of the entire village. Cauli placed a fist over her chest as her chin trembled and Barb shifted as Netmug put a rare and comforting hand on one of her shoulders. Hiccup pulled away from his father and took a deep breath.

"I needâ€œ to say somethingâ€œ" Hiccup murmured, gently moving away from Stoick. He faced the village on the steps, and no one spoke. Quiet hung over Berk like a heavy blanket as Hiccup tried to find words from parched lips, and looked up with puffy eyes.

"I'm not waiting anymore," he whispered. No one heard, but the Hangar doors below parted slowly, and dragons began slinking out, filing behind the villagers and watching Hiccup tentatively, their wings twitching and their teeth showing through trembling lips.

"I'm not waiting anymore!" he repeated, yelling towards the dragons. His voice cracked, and more tears flowed, but he did not weep. His tears were hotter than fire, and burned his skin. He sucked in another breath and it filled his lungs with hot air, making his blood warm and his neck tense. "Two moons have passed, if not more, since Alvin and Dagur together took our lands, our people, our families, our dragons. Two moons have passed and we have rebuilt our homes in an effort to hide the fact that we persevered, hiding in fear of another attack."

He looked over to Rose for a moment. "We have worked our hands to the bone in an attempt to rebuild and we have succeeded. We have spent our resources healing the injured and we have succeeded. We lost all our chiefs, and yet we succeeded. We have proved that we cannot be broken, that evil men can take anything, but they will never have what we have!"

Some villagers began nodding, mumbling to each other. The riders surrounded Hiccup and Rose, smiles tugging at their lips.

"Snowdrop refused to wait. She, a girl of only four winters, hijacked a Nadder and flew after her sister. And although she was not successful I'm going to be."

He swallowed as his voice shook again. "I owe it to her, to her unmoving spirit that taught me so much, to stop waiting. We owe it to her. We owe it to our brothers, our sisters, our families. We owe it to the dead, who fought to keep us standing tonight."

Hiccup looked to Toothless next to him, who looked up at him with adoration. Hiccup mounted him and addressed the village with one final breath, his shoulders rising and his blood boiling and his body ready. "The alliance may be in tatters, but there are nomads. There are clans who may not be loyal to us on paper, but they do not deserve the torment of Alvin and Dagur. We are taking back our lands, and we are taking back our seas. We are taking back our people and if we fail, we die knowing we tried. Either way, they will know. They will hear our screams and cries, they will feel the heat of our flames, and the world will know: the Saviour is coming, and will repay them for the torments and tortures they have made us endure for generations. If you ride with me, I cannot guarantee you will survive. But I'd rather die trying knowing I flew after those we lost. I am not waiting anymore!"

Cheers roared out among the people. Cauli flung her fist in the air, and Stoick pursed his lips tightly, wanting to say something but holding it back. The original riders rested a hand on each other, creating a web of connection between all of them, ready to fly, to fight, as they had spent the past five years training for.

"Rose looked down towards the dragons, her heart flipping uncomfortably.

We will change everything, Stingbreath murmured in her mind. _You could only cage him up for so long._

Rose swallowed her reply and looked back to her brother, saying a small prayer in her mind.

The family only just got back together, she thought bitterly.

_And now it's time to get the rest of it, _Toothless said gently. _You stopped him from saving her the first time. Don't do it again. He was never a confident chief. But if we get him back in the air, we will finally have a chance._

Rose nodded slowly, closing her eyes and stifling a tremble as the rest of the village ran in every direction to gather their supplies.

"We're flying out under the cover of darkness," Hiccup told Stoick and Gobber. "We'll head south beyond the alliance borders and find some supporters."

"If you are seen, then Astrid and Valka will be in danger," Rose warned.

"Which is why we are flying by night," Hiccup replied. "The original riders, Rose, and myself are going south to find some sort of trader, someone who can bring more resources to Berk under oath. We'll find

out where this new island is and we'll make a plan with Astrid in the dreamland so she can warn the other hostages. By then, Stoick should be in better shape to help and the villagers will have more time to prepare. We'll return in a week, maybe two, to make final preparations. Once we know where they are, we're going in with everything we got."

"What we got isn't much, Hiccup," Gobber said bleakly.

"I know thatâ€|" Hiccup replied. "But I have to try. Something inside me is saying I've got to get Astrid out of there before the next moon. And if they're underground, as Astrid told me in the dreamland, we only have that much time before the snow sets in. After that, we won't be able to get them out. We can't let that happen."

36. Rule Number One

Hello, everyone! Here is the next chappie; it's amazing how much time I've had over this break, and I am very thankful for it. More chapters ready for you, coming soon! Thank you to all of you who recently followed and favourited and reviewed, and thank you to those who are still reading since Chapter One. _

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><p>Chapter Thirty-Six: Rule Number One

The beauty and freedom the sea held for Ruffnut wore off quickly when her motion sickness took over her body like lightning over a Skrill's wings. After five days of constant hurling and other bodily discomforts, she resorted to keeping her body half-hung over the railing of the ship, ready to barf into the waters below at any moment. Trader Johann had fed her a large meal a week prior and when it had a chance to rest in her starved belly, it refused to stay down.

"I never expected a dragon rider to have sea sickness," he said in a failed attempt at a joke.

"I don't do boats," Ruffnut slurred, a hiccup and a gurgle punctuating her strangled words. "Never have."

After that interaction, Johann chose to stay away. He let her hurl off the back of the boat while he steered the ship south towards another small fishing village, where he made a quick trade and exchanged a few words.

"Where you heading next, Johann?" one of the men asked as Johann untied the rope tethering Fancy Freya to the docks.

"Oh, I dunno," he replied. "North, probably."

"North?" the man scoffed uncertainly. "There's nothing up there anymore, surely you've heard about that."

"I wouldn't be so sure," Johann replied as he climbed onto his ship. "I've been hearing whispers."

"And what do those whispers say?" the man asked with a loud

snort.

"Usually nonsense, really," Johann said with a sniff, which made the man laugh. "But recently? Someone 'round the bend told me a little something 'bout a Night Fury and his rider."

"You can't be serious," the man was quick to say, even though a little flicker behind his eyes told of an inkling of hope.

"Oh, but I can," Johann replied with a cheeky grin.

"You know of the treaty! If you sail up North, you'll â€" "

"I signed no treaty," Johann interrupted coldly. "I was ordered to stay away by a smelly fat man and his joke of a naval captain. Besides, if I want to brave the seas for a small vacation on what should be an abandoned island, then I'm going to do it. But Berk has always been gracious to me and I'd like to at least pay my respects. Wouldn't you?"

The man had no reply for Johann, and Johann nodded and lowered his sails. The wind caught them and slowly pulled them out of the bay. Johann set the wheel after taking a peek at his compass, and caught Ruffnut as she inched her way along the walls and the railings, trying to talk to him while still looking a strange shade of green.

"That's the last of the villages," Johann said with a huff.

"So we â€" we're heading to Berk," Ruffnut stated, trying to sound assertive. But she put the back of her hand against her lips and she swallowed painfully. "C'mon, let's go."

"Well, I was thinking â€" " Johann began as he rummaged in his side satchel all of a sudden. "Let's see â€" ah! Here."

He pulled his hand free and showed Ruffnut a vial. She looked at him with a scowl.

"What's that?" she asked.

"Ginger root," he replied happily. "Hard to find, but it will help with your tummy."

"I don't want help with my tummy," she retorted. "I want to go home."

Johann frowned. "I've been looking for this everywhere for you. Please, eat some so you can have some relief."

"I'll have relief when I can see my brother again."

"But â€" "

"No!" Ruffnut hiccuped. "I don't want any drugs, I don't trust you and I'm not comfortable sleeping around you!"

"Come now, after almost a week of icky things, don't you want to not puke for a few hours? I can give you the key to the door, you can sleep in my bed while I set course. I also found some teas â€" a

wonderful old lady shorter than my knee gave them to me. It'll knock you right out, no dreams or nothing!"

Ruffnut growled. "What do you not understand? I am not gonna sleep on your stupid boat!"

Johann shut his mouth and looked away, hurt. He shook his head, but he pulled a key from a chain around his neck and forced it into her hand before she could protest. "I am not Dagur," he spat. "I am not like that monster that holed you up and I know that all you want to do is sleep. So you can take my key and lock yourself in. I've designed the lock so no one can get in. But you'll keel over from exhaustion long before we reach Berk, lass."

He handed her the vial of ginger root and the cloth bag of tea, and mumbling to himself awkwardly again, he crawled into his hammock on the other side of the ship and turned his back to her. "Oh! And remember rule number two? Don't make fun of my ship!"

Ruffnut didn't want to feel bad. She was justified in her distrust. But she had known Johann since she could walk to the docks and he never hurt a soul. But the torment of other men across the sea made her hatred overcome her each day. And sleeping meant nightmares. Anytime she let her eyes fall shut, she would see Dagur all over again, but it never felt like a normal dream. It was like she would be back there in the flesh, but she couldn't move, and she couldn't wake up.

She looked down at the teas in her bone-thin hand and felt her eyes droop. Sleep did sound like a good idea, and if Johann was right in saying it wouldn't let her dream, she was willing to try it. She took the key and, after a few stubborn hours of walking past it, she finally opened it and slammed it shut, locking the door quickly so she wouldn't change her mind. She was quick to boil the water over the small flame in the corner and she downed the scalding mixture as fast she could. Then, she ate half the root through groans and gags and forced herself to at least sit on the bed.

The furs made her nose wrinkle. The bed smelled like Johann. She almost considered sitting on the floor, but the bed made her backside relax, and soon, she convinced herself to at least lie on top of the fur stiffly, like a plank of wood as she waited for the tea to kick in. She constantly looked towards the door, as if Johann would break in and be there, twirling his moustache and giggling menacingly. But in her drugged stupor, the thought just made her snort loudly as she began falling asleep, her stomach not entirely sure if it wanted to upchuck or snooze. It must have settled on snooze, because after a week of almost nothing, Ruffnut fell under the deepest sleep of her life.

* * *

><p>Johann, like Ruffnut, had fallen asleep hours after they had departed. He hadn't been able to sleep with Ruffnut being violently ill around him, but now she was asleep, so was he. At first, he only wanted a tiny nap. Just a little doze-away, enough to clear his head. He'd be awake to make Ruffnut and himself another terrible meal and he'd count his stock.<p>

But Johann misjudged his exhaustion, and stayed sleeping as the night

crawled towards him. Even when he was shivering, the back of his mind convinced him to curl into a tighter ball so he could go back to dreaming of large Viking women and huge lamb roasts slathered in gravy upon thick peasant bread with a horn of ale in his fistâ€!

When the rain sprinkled his face, he startled awake. And as soon as he sat up, the rain began to pour, and a streak of lightning cracked over the ship, deafening him a single second later. He tumbled out of his hammock, tangling his legs in the netting. He wriggled as the ship began to bob violently, the mast creaking dangerously.

"Ruffnut!" he yelled. He kicked his feet until they came free. They popped out of his leather boots and he ran to the door. "Let me in!"

But Ruffnut was dead to the world, sleeping deep under the furs with drool pouring out of her mouth, deaf as Johann banged against the door.

The water broke over the railing, slamming into Johann and shoving him against the door. He fell as the water sucked him back, and when he jumped to his feet, he ran for the creaking mast. He had to lower the sail, he knew. The wind was biting into it too violently, it would turn the ship over itself if he didn't.

Ruffnut was safe inside the room, he reminded himself. So he began untying the sails as fast as he could, ducking every time lightning flashed overhead. But the waves were getting rougher and rougher, and began flinging him around in every which way. Bamboozled after being smashed in the face with icy salt water, he staggered back towards the mast and clung to it for dear life.

"Hold on Freya!" he screamed over the wind. "We're gonna be fine! Just stay upright, girl, this isn't so bad!"

Truthfully, this was turning into one of the worst storms Fancy Freya had the pleasure of sailing into. Johann never sailed across the sea at this time of year because of these storms. Why the hell did he think he could do it now? But he laughed nervously as his heart raced in his chilled chest as he reminded himself over and over again that he was going to be okay if he held on tight enough, now that the sails were almost untethered. Water was sloshing over the deck, soaking Johann to the bone, and the cold took his breath away.

He felt the ship rise into the air as a huge swell carried them up, up, up. The ship crashed down, smashing Johann's head back painfully as the ship landed. Ruffnut groaned and opened her eyes. She had been thrown from the bed, and it was too dark to see. She struggled to her feet, holding her head, as she fumbled for the key.

The boat rocked again and she was torn from the door. She cried out as she flew back, crashing into the shelves behind her full of worldly wares. Trinkets, large and small, all fell on top of her as her body smacked into the floor. Awake, she sloppily scrambled to her feet. Luckily, the force of the waves tipped the back of the boat up roughly, which sent her half-flying towards the door once more. The wind was knocked from her as thunder and water rocked the ship so hard, her bones rattled when she made contact with the door. She

fumbled again in the dark until she shoved the key into the lock, cranking it over and pulling the door. The boat rocked back and she clawed for the door as she flew away from it again, and water spilled in.

She gasped and cried out as the icy water splashed up her body. It almost ripped her clothes off before it sucked back, pulling her with it. Suddenly, she was outside. The wind froze her eyes as the clothes that hung off her clung to her body heavily. She struggled to stand, squinting through the mist for any sign of Johann.

Ruffnut screamed his name over the howling wind, fear ripping her apart every which way. She grabbed the mast and held it, feeling it creak within her arms, and her breaths whistled in and out frantically.

Johann grabbed her from behind, seizing one of her arms. Ruffnut shrieked but Johann yelled over her. "You should have stayed in the room!" he cried. Ruffnut struggled against him.

"Let go of me!" she screamed. Johann's grip didn't loosen. But when Ruffnut looked up, it wasn't Johann looking back at her. It was Dagur.

"It's me!" the apparition replied loudly. "It's me, Johann!"

Ruffnut slowly crumpled to the ground, frozen at the sight of the face staring back at her. "N-No, you're lying!"

"Look at me!" Johann yelled desperately. He pulled her up and dragged her towards one of the railings. Ruffnut struggled, screaming. She thought Dagur was going to throw her over the side of the boat. "Remember, rule number one!"

"Please," Ruffnut begged as Johann pushed her up against the railing. The moment her hips connected with the wooden beam, she screamed again. Looking over the huge expanse of furious ocean as Johann bent her over the railing, she began to wail and wriggle. "Stop it! Get off me!"

Johann used to sail with sailors who carried their memories with them everywhere they went. Storms, wars, robberies — some people couldn't let go of some things. That wasn't their fault, he knew as he felt for his belt. Ruffnut spun around and tried to hit him, but Johann stopped her fist with one of her hands.

"I'm going to tie you to the boat!" Johann yelled to her. Ruffnut's eyes flickered under the flash of lightning. But there was a hint of recognition.

"Johann?" She blinked and tried to shake her head. "Why are you on top of me?!"

"I'm tying you to the boat!" he replied as the boat began to rise again, twice as high as before. He pulled his belt free. "I need you to sit down! I'm going to tie your body to the boat! The room is waterlogged, but you'll get thrown or pulled off by the waves if I don't!"

The boat rose higher and higher into the air, and Johann blinked the

salt water from his eyes as he spun Ruffnut around and wrapped the double-long belt around Ruffnut's belly once, twice, and buckled it, tightening it with a grunt.

"Hold onto the railing!" he cried. "Freya's gonna drop harder than a dragon shot out of the sky when this wave breaks! I'm gonna let go and find myself some rope! Don't let go!"

Johann left her and tried to run back towards the port-side. He grabbed his hammock, and with one of his fishing knives, he slashed at the rope. The boat began to tip forward and Ruffnut clung to the railing of the boat for dear life, clenching her teeth and sobbing.

"Hold on, Ruffnut!" Johann repeated as the hammock came free. "I'm coming!"

He cursed to himself.

"I should have never done this, I should have stuck to the coast!"

He rushed with the hammock to Ruffnut, where he wrapped himself around his waist. He threw the ends under the railing and tried to tie it as the boat crashed down.

Feeling the boat tumble from under her, Ruffnut held on with all her might. Johann abandoned the knot he was tying and threw himself over Ruffnut as the boat landed jarringly.

"Just hold on! Just hold â€""

A wave flew over the edge of the boat and tried to pull Ruffnut over the boat. She shrieked as she felt her body fly over the edge, but the belt caught her. She dangled from it, the air crushed out of her. A wave battered her back and smacked her head into the railing, sending her into a world of darkness.

* * *

><p>"I told you to leave her at home!" Netmug yelled to Cauli. They had just flown out of the storm, heading south towards the fishing villages.</p>

"She wanted to come with us, I'm not like you! I don't lock up my women like you do!"

"Guys, stop it!" Hiccup ordered. He looked back towards the storm. Barb had been separated in the clouds, but Rose could still hear the dragon.

"The Scauldrone is taking Barb home," Rose assured Netmug. "She'll be fine, the Scauldrone couldn't handle the storm in the air."

"You better be right," Netmug spat as they flew on.

* * *

><p>Far north, a ship emerged from the torment of the storm. Men, battered and exhausted, were reattaching the sails and returning the

small ship to its rightful ways. The captain shivered as he looked onwards towards the north.<p>

"We lost Hjerm," one of the men told him sadly. "Got washed by one of them waves."

The captain didn't take his gaze off the ocean ahead. "I liked Hjerm," he sighed. "I shouldn't have sent him out when I didâ€!"

But the captain smiled and gave his man a nod.

"His death won't be for naught," the captain said. "We sail onwards. I want to reach the borders of the alliance before nightfall."

His tribesmen all set to work on the ship as he looked at his compass and rolled his neck, cracking it. He shuddered and snapped his compass shut. He jumped over the railing onto the main deck and ran towards the spar. He climbed it and perched on it, looking ahead with a squint. Berk was within his reach. Dagur and Alvin had sent him to find more dragons, and being the finest dragon trapper sailing the sea, there was no man better suited for the challenge. Just thinking about the dragons he'd find nesting around Berk made him smile.

"Eret!" one of his men yelled.

"I'm having a moment," Eret responded as he sucked in a deep breath of ocean air.

"Well, can it wait? Looks like we've run into something."

Eret turned around, jumping off the spar back onto the deck. "A dragon?"

"No, a ship," the man responded. He handed Eret a telescope. He looked through it and raised his eyebrows to the sight of a ship bobbing in no discernible direction.

"Is it a Berserker?" the man asked.

"No," Eret replied stiffly. "It's a trader. But there shouldn't be any traders this far north. Looks like his ship's too damaged to sail."

He collapsed the telescope and ran up the stairs to the wheel.

"Let's go check it out!" he said with a smile. "Maybe the poor bastard has some stuff we can swipe."

He spun the wheel and approached the ship cautiously, but with a smile tugging at his mouth. It didn't take them long to get to the vessel. When they were close enough, Eret supped his hands around his mouth.

"Anyone there?!" he called. He waited for a few moments.
"Hellooooo?!"

When no one responded, they flung some harpoons and rope over the railings, tethering the two ships together.

"I'll go up myself," Eret said boastfully. "There may not be anything of worth up here. I don't want to waste time, be ready to leave right away."

He climbed the rope deftly, his heart rising to the feeling of adventure. He really just wanted to find the ale before any of his other men did, to have that first taste. He pulled himself onto the ship and sighed, shaking his head and looking around with an eyebrow raised. The mast of the ship had totally snapped and was no longer on the ship, along with the sails and the wheel. Oddities and trinkets littered the deck along with barrels. Most were broken open, but some had survived. He wandered towards them nonchalantly, looking under debris here and there.

"Looks like the captain's been claimed by the sea!" he yelled to his crew. He found a chest tucked away under a pile of splintered wood and rotten fish that had spilled from a barrel. He reached down and picked it up, humming to himself and puckering his lips as he opened it with his thick fingers. He rummaged through the contents, which amassed mostly to sea water and iron bangles, but his fingers found something he had never seen before.

He pulled the fine silver chain free and raised his eyebrows as the Night Fury scale followed it. It hovered in front of his face for a moment as he marvelled at it.

Suddenly, someone grabbed his hair and wrenched his head back, resting a frigid blade against his stubbly throat.

"Drop the necklace. Right. Now."

Eret smirked at the sound of the woman's voice. "Sorry, lass, is this your ship?"

"You bet your ass it is. And you're trespassing."

"Come now, darling, I â€“"

Eret's smile disappeared as Ruffnut dug the blade harder against his skin. He choked and shut his mouth.

"Don't call me that," Ruffnut sneered. "I'm immune to the bullshit you men call 'charm' so here's how it's gonna be: you're gonna put the scale back and get the hell off my boat or I'll kill you. Understand?"

Eret cursed and slowly put the scale down. But before he put it back into the chest, he grabbed Ruffnut's wrist with the other hand, twisting it away from his neck.

"We've got a crazy one up here, boys!" he yelled. "Untie the ship!"

He whirled around and Ruffnut growled at him. But Eret glared at her, scrutinizing.

"Where are you from?" he asked slowly as he looked at the harsh corners of her starved face. She had split her eyebrow open and dried blood framed her right eye, bluer than the underside of an iceberg.

Her body was worse for wear, and her shoulder was bandaged. "Are you alone?"

"Get your hands off me," she replied.

"Your ship has no mast. No sails. You can't go anywhere."

Ruffnut kneed him in the stomach. When he was bent over, she kicked him in the head, sending him back.

"I told you to get off my boat."

Eret sat up, holding his face with one hand and holding the other one up. "Alright, alright!" He got up and frowned at her. "Did you have to go overkill on my face?!"

"GET OFF MY BOAT!" Ruffnut shrieked again.

"I'm going!" Eret yelled back. He got up and stumbled past her to the ropes. "You can have your shitty 'boat'. I was gonna offer you a ride with us."

"Yeah right, move," Ruffnut spat as she kicked Eret's backside so hard, he tripped over the railing and fell on top of one of his own men upon his ship. Everyone cut the ropes and the ship lurched forward. Ruffnut watched them as they sailed away, a tiny pang of regret tugging at her gut.

That was probably the only chance she had at getting home now. She stifled a sniffle and grabbed the chest off the deck and tore it open, digging through it. But the scale was no where to be found. She pursed her lips and felt tears sting her eyes as she felt completely and entirely alone, and found herself yearning for another one of Johann's terrible meals.

37. A Familiar Face

Surprise! Early update! Hopefully you all enjoy it. :)

* * *

><p>Chapter Thirty-Seven: A Familiar Face

Eret looked at the Night Fury scale in his fingers, his lower lip between his teeth and a song on his tongue. That woman must have stowed away on that ship, he decided. But there was something about her he couldn't quite put his finger on. Was it the blonde hair? The blue eyes? She wasn't a southerner like everyone outside the alliance borders. She was probably a northerner, he thought as he shifted the scale back and forth to reflect the grey light of day over it.

"Should have looked for some more furs while you were up in that ship," one of his men growled under his breath. "I'm freezing my ass off."

"There was nothing on that ship worth getting," Eret replied.

"What about that woman?" another man asked. "Been awfully long time

since I've had some company, if you catch my â€"'

"Shut it," Eret sighed. "I already told you there was nothing on that ship worth getting. If we find ourselves some dragons, then Dagur will give you any woman you want."

The men groaned and walked away, mumbling nonsense about things they missed and things they wanted. There was no end with those fools, Eret thought. The sooner they found a dragon, the sooner they would stop complaining. But Dagur had pillaged most dragons out of the neutral territory so they had to sail further north to find nests that hadn't been scared off. They were smart creatures.

Not smart enough to avoid the north, he thought with a smirk. North was where Dagur and Alvin were. North of Outcast Island, beyond the boundaries any ship dared sail, besides his own and those of the Berserkers. Hard as hell to find through the tiny islands that threatened to gut the boats that travelled there. He pulled the Night Fury scale over his head and tucked it under his shirt. He wiped the back of his hand across his nose and coughed, then went to the wheel of his ship. They were inside alliance borders now.

"Keep all eyes out for any signs of movement!" he ordered his men. "We're entering dragon territory."

They sailed on, and Eret kept vigilant, waiting for a flicker or a twitch, something to latch onto. Men were already waiting with harpoons, nets, and the trap was cranked open, ready to hold any dragon they could wrap their ropes around.

"Mehran, do you see anything?" Eret asked. Mehran, an old buzzard of a man, looked down at him and scoffed.

"If I saw somethin', I would tell yah," he sneered. He returned to his telescope and chewed on whatever disgusting sludge he was chewing on. Eret kept looking at him, arms crossed, until Mehran rolled his eyes and looked back down again. "If I was your real dad, I'd smack that look right off your face."

"Too bad you're not, then," Eret replied. "Also, the scope works better if you flip it around the other way."

Mehran looked at the scope in his hands, which was backwards, and he sneered at Eret, his bushy grey and black hair framing his chubby old face.

"You're not funny, boy," he grumbled.

"Wasn't tryin' to be! What do you see?"

Mehran looked through the scope again. "Oh what a surprise! Nothing! Nothing over there, nothing over here! Just a big bucket of nothing!"

But as he swung the scope towards the left, he faltered and almost choked on his spittle. Eret raised his eyebrows.

"Oh, you see something?" he asked.

Mehran glared at him and spat, missing Eret by feet. "Shut your mouth

and steer the ship left, we got a downed one over on one of them icebergs."

"Was that so hard?"

"Eret, if I had both my hands, I'd strangle the life outta yah!"

"Too bad you don't, then!" Eret laughed as he turned the wheel. "Get ready men! We've got one! It's down, but keep wary. It may just be sitting for a rest!"

The ship approached a clutch of icebergs that had broken off a small, uninhabited island. There was one big one, and a dragon was curled up in a ball on the surface.

"It's alive," Mehran croaked from the nest atop the mast. "Got some nasty scars! Andâ€| waitâ€| uhâ€| Eret, best you take a look at this boy, my eyes are goin' funny."

Mehran tossed Eret the scope, and he looked through it quickly. Seeing the dragon at first confused his mind to a point where he wasn't sure what he was looking at, as if he were to read a word often enough it would seem incorrect. But he blinked a few times until he figured it out.

"I can't believe I'm saying this, but â€“ that thing is wearing a saddle!" he told his men as they approached. They were getting closer and closer, and soon they were close enough to fire a harpoon.

The Nadder lifted her head as the ship careened with a small chunk of ice, and she fanned out her crown of spikes, hissing loudly.

"It's alive, alright," Eret grinned. "Get ready!"

The Nadder struggled to stand on the unstable ice as the men aimed their harpoon canons towards her. She fanned out her wings and all the men faltered, looking to Eret.

"What is that thing?" Mehran asked loudly. "Throw up the telescope, I can't see a thing with these stupid eyes!"

"We can figure it out once we catch her, get ready!"

"Wait!" a shrill, tiny voice screamed. Eret froze, a stupefied look on his face, as a little girl's head popped up from behind the Nadder spikes. Her blonde hair was wildly frizzy and curly, and she had blue bags under her big blue eyes. Blonde hair, blue eyes, Eret noticed immediately. "Don't shoot me!"

Eret stormed up to the stern, looking at the girl with a frown.

"What the hell are you doing out here?" he asked.

"Why the heck are you out here?" she retorted grumpily. "Why are you pointing sharp things at me? Huh? Huh, huh, huh?!"

"We're fishermen," Eret lied. The little girl, however, was smart.

"You're a big fat liar, that's what you guys are! You're dragon trappers, I learned all about you when I was a baby! Your boat is straight outta my book!"

"That's not true," Eret stammered, trying to find words. "We, uh, we were sent out to find you!"

"I've never seen you in my entire life," the girl snapped back.

"I'm an old friend of the family's. Your mum and dad sent me."

The Nadder hissed loudly and flung her tail towards the boat, sending spikes soaring right at Eret's head. Eret ducked and the spikes burrowed into the mast behind him.

"My mama and papa are dead, idiot!" the girl screamed. "Stop lying to me or I'll light your boat on fire, you creep!"

Eret lifted his hands. "Easy, easy, alright!"

His eyes trailed to the Nadder's mechanical wing, which had been torn by the storm a few nights before.

"Did uhâ€œ! did you build that?" he asked carefully, looking over to one of his men, who tightened his grip on his canon.

"No," she huffed.

"It's broken."

"That's obviou â€œ obvi â€œ I know that, stupid!" she struggled to say, frowning at her inability to pronounce the right word. "I'm waiting for people to come get me!"

"I don't think anyone is coming," Eret replied seriously. "There was a massive storm that passed through this way, they would have avoided it."

"You don't know that," the girl whined. "You're an idiot."

Eret looked to his man again, who gave a little nod. "Why don't, uhâ€œ! I could give you a ride. I have room for your dragon on my dragon ship, and I'm heading north. You're from the north, I take it?"

"I'm from Berk," she responded proudly.

"Which is north," he finished. "I thought Berk was wiped out, lass. Nothing left of it."

Snowdrop bit her lip, then puffed out her chest. "You're right. I'm all that's left."

"Shame," Eret said sarcastically.

"You men are bad men," the girl said, wonderingly. She pointed up to Eret's sails, which had the Skrill painted upon them. "Which means you probably know other bad men, yes?"

Eret pursed his lips and wrinkled his nose. "What?"

"Don't lie, I can tell when you're lying. The weird paint lines on your chin do this weird shifty thingy â€“ hey, do you have those fings because you can't grow a beard? Everyone on Berk has beards."

Eret put his face in his hand as some of the men snorted. "They're the tribal markings of my people," he said through gritted teeth.

"Are your people bad people?"

"What is this, a game?! No!"

"What about the people who paid you to hunt our dragons? Huh?"

Eret shook his head and snapped at his man. "Will you fire the stupid thing, already?!"

The man shot the canon, sending a harpoon towards them. The Nadder threw the mechanical wing in front of herself, knocking the harpoon out of the way. The dragon shot her tail out and snatched Eret from the ship, holding him over the water. Eret kicked his feet as he held the tail desperately.

"Let go of me!" he said.

"Into the cold water where no one can reach you?" the girl said with a grin. "You sure?!"

"Stop, stop!" he cried. "What do you want?!"

"The troof," the girl replied, putting her chin in her hand. The Nadder glared at him. "First, what's your name?"

"Put me back on my ship!"

The girl looked down at the Nadder, who slowly lowered Eret towards the waves below. His boots sank below the surface and he gasped as the water filled them, freezing his toes.

"What's your name?!"

"Eret!" he replied angrily. "Now put me back!"

"Nope, not yet. You're supposed to ask me what my name is now."

"Fine," Eret spat. "What is your name?"

"Snowdrop," she said with a toothy smile. "And this is Stormfly. What are you doing out here?"

"Trapping dragons."

"For who?"

"Why does it matter?!"

Snowdrop rolled her eyes as the Nadder sank Eret into the water up to his shirt. The moment the water touched his groin, he let out a little squeal.

"Dagur! I work for Dagur! Pull me out, pull me out!"

Stormfly pulled Eret out of the water and lifted Eret to eye-level with Snowdrop.

"You think I'm playing games now, idiot?" Snowdrop asked as she crossed her arms. "Last I checked, Dagur was a bad person. I knew you were lying."

"What's Dagur to you?" he asked, shivering uncontrollably.

"He stole my sister," Snowdrop replied. "I want her back, and you are gonna take me to her."

"I don't get to see the inside of the Underground!" Eret yelled. "Even then, how would I know if she was even there?! Now you put me back on my ship or my men will skewer your dragon!"

Snowdrop looked at him with a hilarious degree of disappointment. Stormfly slammed Eret under the water completely, holding him under for a second, then lifting him up and slamming back down again and again.

"I'm sorry, I can't hear you over the sound of YOU DROWNING!" Snowdrop yelled. She lifted Eret up again and glared in his face as Eret sputtered for air, Stormfly's tail now wrapped around his foot. All of his men had abandoned their canons and were either laughing wildly or absolutely dumbfounded as to what to do. But Snowdrop's face had changed from furious to desperate.

"Where did you get that?" she asked quickly as Eret coughed up the rest of the water. He groaned as Snowdrop's eyes remained fixed on the Nigh Fury scale dangling from his neck. Stormfly threw him back onto his boat and with a gallant leap, she jumped onto the boat and scrambled up the side. She rolled Eret over and the dragon sniffed at his shirt, cooing softly. Snowdrop jumped up and over Stormfly's crown and landed on Eret's stomach. The air flew out of him and he gasped for air and Stormfly grabbed the Night Fury.

"Where did you get this?!" she asked again. "This is my sister's, why the heck do you have it?!"

"I found it," Eret groaned. "I can I can take you to it."

"Is she on it?"

Eret cleared his head and looked up at Snowdrop, who was desperately begging him for an answer.

"What did she look like?"

"Like me, but bigger!"

Eret cursed under his breath and tried to sit up, his gut screaming in pain. "There was someone on that ship" she had blonde hair,

blue eyes like yours. Tried to kill me with a perring knife."

"Take me to her!" Snowdrop demanded. Mehran looked down from the nest.

"You're gonna be a shitty person if you don't!" he piped in. Eret made a rude gesture towards him and groaned again.

"Fine," he spat. "Your dragon can stay in the trap."

"No," Snowdrop replied. "She stays out here. And no fishy business. If you do this for me, then you can take whatever dragon you find from Berk. It's crawling with them, almost infesting it, now that there are no more people."

Eret glared at Snowdrop. "If you're lying, I'm taking yours."

Snowdrop squealed and gave Eret a hug. "Fank you! Fank you fank you! And I promise! I'm only four, I haven't learned how to lie yet, don't worry!"

* * *

><p>Ruffnut sat on the deck of the ship with the back of her head resting against the stern, lolling back and forth with the waves. The barrels holding the ship's supply of fresh water had been obliterated by the storm, and two days of sitting on the boat with nothing but scraps had made her weary. She should have jumped on that ship, she thought to herself. She would have been halfway to Berk by now, she knew.<p>

But she didn't know that man. She thought about the way his ship looked and knew there was no way he was a simple trader. He had traps and canons on his boat, and he didn't look to belong in the alliance. Dragon trappers, she thought. Better than starving or freezing to death on this stupid ship, she thought.

She was able to start a small fire in the room once more to at least dry out a fur or two, which she bundled herself up in outside to keep an eye out for any other fishermen that could take her home. She had already tried creating a slapdash sail and mast, but she didn't have the strength to hoist the railing free to create one. She was useless. Pathetic. Alone.

She sank lower into her furs and wiped away a tear. Trader Johann had been taken by the sea, his one true friend in the entire world. All because she made him go to Berk. He even told her about the dangers of the sea around this time of year and every time she thought of that, she'd bang her head into the wooden stern behind her. She would never see her brother again. She was so close and yet she wouldn't get there. Valka would be so disappointed in her.

Ruffnut opened her eyes and looked out over the sea again feebly. There had to be something, someone, out there. Maybe a dragon. She could train one and get home that way. But there were no dragons around these parts, and she drifted without any discernible direction. She looked one way, then the other, then back the other way. When she saw the faint bobbing of a ship, she tried to stand to meet it, but couldn't find the strength.

The ship approached slowly, painfully slow, as Ruffnut watched with an unwavering eye. It saw her, it was sailing right for her. When she noticed it was the ship of the man who had stolen the Night Fury scale, her smile disappeared. Why were they coming back? She let the boat approach with her perring knife back in her hand under her furs, waiting until she could see the ship turn and float next to her.

"Hello, darling!" the man hollered up. "I've come back!"

Ruffnut didn't respond.

"I've spent an extra day and night tracking you down!" he continued. "I'm taking you home!"

Glee filled her heart, but it was immediately replaced with distrust. When she didn't reply again, Eret licked his lips, worried. They threw the ropes back up and secured the ships together. Eret climbed up with Snowdrop clinging to his back.

"No funny business," she reminded Eret. "If you ditch me here, Stormfly's gonna eat all your men."

"I know, I know," Eret sighed. He had actually grown to like Snowdrop overnight, but he didn't dare admit it in front of his crew. He clambered over the railing and looked about, finding Ruffnut huddled over the furs. Snowdrop jumped off his back and Ruffnut's jaw dropped. She crawled out of her furs towards the child, who slowed her pace. That wasn't Astrid she thought with a huge feeling of disappointment. But it was someone else who had been taken. Snowdrop jumped into Ruffnut's arms, and Ruffnut held her to her frail body as tightly as she could.

"Ruffnut, I found you!" Snowdrop cried. Eret awkwardly turned his back and began giving orders to his men. Snowdrop whispered in Ruffnut's ear. "I told everyone that there's no one on Berk. But that's a lie, okay?"

"Okay," Ruffnut replied quietly. "Isâ€¢ is Tuffnut okay?"

"Yes."

Tears rushed to Ruffnut's eyes.

"They think we're sisters. Okay?"

"Okay," Ruffnut sputtered through fat tears.

Eret turned and smiled, giving Ruffnut a little bow. "Alright, miladies, let's get you two back to your desolate island. The sooner I can stop feeding you the better."

Ruffnut struggled to stand, holding Snowdrop's hand. "Thank you for bringing her to me. Take â€¢" she groaned, holding her shoulder, which had started to return to it's sickly state. "Take anything you want from the ship. Anything you may want or need. So long as you promise to bring us to Berk."

"I've already promised Snowdrop that courtesy," Eret replied. "We'll pillage this poor excuse of a boat and be on our way."

Ruffnut frowned. "Don't make fun of this ship," she said quietly. Eret looked up for a moment before pursing his lips and giving a small nod. "And if you or any of your men touch me, I'm turning them into a girl."

"I'll let them know," was the simple response.

Eret and his men traded places with Ruffnut and Snowdrop. They spent an hour salvaging whatever they could while Snowdrop and Ruffnut cuddled in the corner of the ship, away from the trap, with Stormfly wrapped around them protectively. Ruffnut looked up to the ship that had kept her safe, and she nodded towards it thankfully.

"How did you escape?" Snowdrop asked, looking up at her from under the furs. Ruffnut looked down at her and smiled weakly.

"I pretended to be Astrid," she murmured. "They were going to kill her, so I pretended to be her."

"But you're not dead!" Snowdrop argued.

"I know. I was saved by Hiccup's mum."

Snowdrop's tiny mouth feel open. "What?!"

"Mhmm. I have to tell Hiccup so they can go after her. Butâ€| I don't know where I came from."

"That's okay," Snowdrop said, dropping down to the faintest of whispers. "Eret knows. He works for Dagur. And if we can get him back to Berk, we can make him tell us where he is."

38. Traitors

Another surprise update! Thank you for the awesome reviews, I'm glad you enjoy Snowdrop as much as I do!

* * *

><p>Chapter Thirty-Eight: Traitors

"I'm sorry, I can't do it," the man stammered as Rose stared at him with an annoyed glance.

"Why not?" Rose asked. "Berk is in dire need of supplies. Our people have been taken from us, and our trader is no where to be found."

"I already told you!" replied the little fat bald man sitting across from her. "Dagur and Alvin have strictly forbidden any of our people to travel north within alliance borders. He told us nothing was up there, it would just be a waste of our own resources."

"Why do you think you have been forbidden to travel to a place you think is abandoned?" Rose stared at the man accusingly. "I'm living proof it wasn't entirely abandoned. There are young mothers with babies on that island with little food or water!"

"P-Please don't use women and children to guilt me into helping you, I already told you I won't! I have my own people to protect!"

"How many of those were already taken?"

The man opened his mouth to reply, but made no sound. She had hit a nerve. She leaned forward and took a deep breath, her makeshift riding suit creaking gently.

"My mother is there. She's been there for fifteen years. Hiccup's wife, the woman who will bear the heir to the alliance, has been there for almost three moons. So who did you lose?"

"I'm sorry?" the man replied.

"You lost someone. Your wife? Your son? Your daughter?"

The man looked away and swallowed painfully. "Well, I don't think that is any of your business."

Rose stood, shoving her chair into the wall behind her legs. "It is my business!" she yelled at him. He jumped and cowered as she sneered at him. "I am the one flying in there to get them out before the next moon, I'm gonna be the one who get that special someone out of that hellhole! So unless you want me to save him or her, you're gonna send one of your hundreds of ships north to Berk under the protection of two of our dragon riders."

The man looked up slowly and glowered up at Rose. "My niece. She was seven. They didn't take her, they slaughtered her."

"Then help me avenge her death," Rose encouraged. "I ask for something small in return for something huge. Food, water, leather, weapons, and soldiers. I have ample payment and protection."

"And what about Hiccup? You claim he is alive and yet I have not seen proof."

"The only way this works is if Dagur and Alvin believe Hiccup is dead. If they were to ask you about him, you can say you never saw him. You'd be telling the truth. But I can assure you, Hiccup and his Night Fury are, indeed, alive and willing to fight."

"And how many people do you have supporting you on this insane venture?"

"We have about two-hundred, actually," Rose replied, thinking the numbers in her head. The man raised both his eyebrows in surprise, and for the first time in their conversation, he leaned forward, intrigued. "Most are from small fishing villages, but all of them are willing to fight for the cause. If we can take Dagur and Alvin out, the trade routes will be free, along with all the people they have taken and kept as slaves."

The man pondered the idea reluctantly. But after a few more questions and answers, he accepted Rose's offer, taking a large pouch of coin she had taken from the Great Hall chests. He agreed to send supplies along with any soldier who wanted to fight, while swearing under a new alliance, an alliance purely catered towards the overthrowing of

the Berserkers and the Outcasts. After two weeks of flying and rounding up supporters, they were ready to return home.

Rose left the hall, nodding to various people as she did so. Stingbreath waited outside for her, and when she mounted her and took off, she heard the villagers gasp in awe. It was a clear message: dragon riders were still alive, and were willing to fight for them. Rose flew onwards behind the village towards the empty forest behind. Hiccup, Snotlout, Cauli, Netmug, and Fishlegs waved to her as she landed.

"He's accepted, that's the last of them!" she exclaimed as she hopped off her Changewing.

"Great," Hiccup replied happily. "The ships should be arriving in a few days' time. If we go now, we can beat them and greet them at the docks."

He mounted Toothless quickly and the riders took off, ascending straight up into the protection of the clouds.

We are one step closer to getting our Astrid back, Toothless thought proudly as he spun and twirled in the sky. The gods are on our side in this battle, I can feel it.

* * *

><p>Blurry shadows, visions made out of loose shapes and muffled sounds, slowly brought Barb back to consciousness. Mouth dry and head pounding, she groaned and tried to open her eyes. What happened? She had been flying her Scauldron in the storm, she was right behind Netmug when they had been separated by flashes of lightning. Rose told her to fly home, butâ€¦<p>

Barb craned her neck to look at her surroundings, her head aching and her wrists throbbing. When she tried to pull her hands towards her face, her hands were stopped. Metal chains sang out a terrifying song when she tried again. Her wrists were secured with bloody iron shackles that dug into her skin. She blinked and looked back and forth frantically, pulling against the chains again.

She was on a ship, she realized with dismay. Captured and trapped beneath the deck of a very large warship. She tried to stand but cried out when she tried to stand on her leg. Her knee was swollen, violet and navy swirls encircling it. Desperate, she pulled against the chains again and again, trying to break the chain from the wall to no avail.

A small, pathetic croak from behind made her look over her shoulder fearfully. Her Scauldron was in the trap with her, chains around her body and mouth. She was looking a sickly shade of grey, the need for water clear upon her tortured face.

"Wavebreaker," Barb whimpered. The Scaldron huffed and groaned again. "Hey!" she screamed up through the trap's grid door. "My dragon needs water!"

No one responded. But she heard dozens of pairs of heavily clad feet stomp above her. None came to her aid as she huddled in the corner, rocking back and forth, praying to the gods as the ship sailed

north.

It took what felt like days for the ship to reach its destination. In that time, Barb had been thrown a tiny skin of water and a single hunk of stale bread. They gave a bucket of rain water to Wavebreaker, just enough to stanch her thirst, if that. When the ship stopped, men opened the trap doors fully and jumped down, grabbing Barb and attaching Wavebreaker to a pulley as they dragged Barb onto the docks. She screamed and kicked as they did so, but a swift punch to the gut shut her up. When she was doubled over in agony, she looked over and saw the painted Skrill upon one man's leather jerkin. She blanched as they shoved her forward. Her knee gave out and she tumbled into the wood of the docks.

"Get up!" one Berserker ordered.

The man wrenched her up with one hand and dragged her off the docks and towards the main hall. She hobbled to keep up, but the soldier half-dragged her down a series of halls. People parted, and she did a double-take whenever she saw a familiar face, someone from her village, but the soldier never stopped. He marched her up a main hallway towards a large set of wooden doors furnished with iron casting. Outcast guards opened the doors, and Alvin greeted Barb with a sly grin.

Her eyes widened and she struggled against the soldier, who shoved her forward one more time. She fell in a heap at Alvin's feet, who leaned forward from his chair with a sly grin upon his scarred face, his missing teeth sending Barb into a state of panic. Her eyes flicked over to Dagur, who was sharpening a knife on a whetstone beside Alvin, and she shakily looked over to the woman on the other side of Alvin. The woman waved the soldier who had brought Barb in away and the guards shut the doors behind him. Barb trembled as she looked up at the three leaders in front of her.

"Barb of the southern tribes within the alliance," the woman stated coldly. "Welcome to the Underground."

Barb didn't say anything. She merely vibrated like a dry leaf in the wind. Alvin licked his chapped lips and gave a small grunt in thought. Dagur peered over to Alvin with a disgusted look in his face.

"You told me you dealt with the alliance," he growled. "Why is the leader of one of the tribes still alive?"

"My men claim she was caught in the storm," the woman replied. "She was riding a Cauldron."

"A dragon rider?!" Dagur hissed. Alvin hushed him with a hand.

"I want to make a deal with you," he told Barb with another horrible grin. "You see, when I culled your pathetic alliance and purged the lands of you traitorous filth, I thought for sure that everyone would have starved by now. But here you are. I trust your father enjoyed the gift I sent him?"

Barb looked up, clenching her teeth. The memory of her father choking to death as the poison burned his insides was still scorched on the backs of her eyelids.

"You bastard," she spat.

Alvin laughed a long, wheeze-riddled laugh. He clapped and pretended to wipe a tear with his index finger. Barb's eyes burned with hateful tears as Alvin calmed himself down.

"What were you doing in the storm?" he asked, still tittering.

Barb didn't say anything. She seethed slowly, her hair covering her face and her green eyes fixed on the stones in front of her. Her head throbbed as terror, anger, hatred, damnation filled every crevice of her small, frail body.

"Alvin asked you a question!" the woman barked.

"You'll just kill me," Barb whispered.

"Well, if you tell me everything I need to know, I won't," Alvin simply said. "How about that?"

Barb hid behind her curly brown hair, and kept her mouth clamped shut. She didn't want to die. She was a coward. She didn't want to die.

"Nothing?" Alvin asked. "Birdsong, throw her into the Sun Sap. Maybe after her legs have been melted off, she'll reconsider talking."

"No, no, wait!" Barb cried. "I-I don't want to die, I'llâ€| I'll talk."

"What were you doing in the storm?" Alvin asked, firmer this time.

"I-I was flying to the south!"

"From where?" Birdsong interjected.

"â€| Berk. I left Berk. I was trying to find my way back, I don't remember anything else."

"Are there other survivors?" Dagur asked, standing, fists clenched. Barb cowered even harder, shrill breaths burning her throat.

"Yesâ€| "

"Who?"

"They have most of their riders except for the two girls."

Dagur glared over at Alvin, who was doing the math in his head. "And Hiccup. We killed him, too."

Barb's eyes widened again and she averted her gaze. Dagur descended the steps and grabbed Barb by the throat, lifting her. She choked and clawed at his hand as he spat in her face.

"What about Hiccup?" he growled, giving her a shake. "The poison we

planted on the island, it killed him!"

"N-No!" Barb gasped. Dagur howled out in rage and hurled Barb like a rag doll into the steps. There was a loud crack, and Barb curled up in a ball, air barely able to reach her lungs. Birdsong ran between her and Dagur.

"That's enough!" Birdsong barked.

"You told me you killed him!" Dagur screamed at Alvin. "You assured me he wouldn't be an issue!"

Barb coughed and spat a mouthful of blood onto the stone.

"There was a wake," Alvin growled. "A huge wake!" He rolled Barb over and gave her a little shake. She whimpered as blood trickled from her mouth. She couldn't breathe, her right side aching. "Who did the poison kill, then? Stoick?"

"A-Astrid," she wheezed. "Stoick lives."

"That's impossible," Birdsong interjected. "Astrid is alive and is our prisoner. Alvin, this girl is rattling nonsense, she's wasting our time."

Alvin hushed Birdsong with a shake of his hand. "How? No one survives our Outcast Orchid."

"She ∞ she was bonded to her dragon. Someone did some ritual, she woke up after the wake."

"Nonsense!" Birdsong sneered. "She is sputtering nothing but fairytales, probably disillusioned by lack of water."

"I'm telling the truth!" Barb struggled to say. "It saved her, she can even hear her dragon in her mind. Hiccup has the same thing! He can hear his Night Fury in his mind, he ∞ he can heal faster than anything I have ever seen!"

"Enough!" Alvin yelled. "Guards, get this lunatic out of my sight! I want her thrown into the Pit, I want her culled before any of her people discover her existence!"

"Wait, no!" Barb begged. "I'm telling the truth! You have to believe me!"

The doors swung open and the guards stepped around Dagur, grabbing Barb by the arms.

"You promised!" she shrieked, blood framing her teeth. "You promised!"

"I promised that if you told me the truth, I would spare you."

"He's gonna kill you all!" she cried as the guards carried her out. "The Saviour is coming for you!" Her screams eventually gargled off as her lung began filling with blood again, and the doors slammed shut. Alvin threw his helmet across the room and Dagur seethed at him while Birdsong peered between the two.

"Great job, Alvin!" Dagur yelled. "I agreed to help you only after you promised me you would deal with Hiccup!"

"I thought I had," Alvin replied. "That damned name, again! Saviour! Every night I find the words written in blood, Saviour this and Saviour that! I'm worried about a rebellion, now Hiccup is alive?! And he's the Saviour?!"

"If I may," Birdsong interjected. Dagur made a face, but Alvin acknowledged her. "If Hiccup is indeed alive, then he would have tried to infiltrate us by now. He must think we still have his wife; word has not leaked from the Underground that we have already killed her."

"What do you suggest I do? The sea is too treacherous for the Berserker ships, how do you expect us to stop him?!"

Alvin wrinkled his nose. "They were trying to fly south. Probably trying to round up supplies or resources. Which is not good news for us."

"I'm not finished," Birdsong interrupted. She pursed her lips, thinking about Ruffnut. After sailing out weeks ago with no word back about her arrival, she assumed the worst. "Dagur, for once, is right. The sea is too dangerous this time of year. Our dragon trappers all know this; their ships are the only ones equipped for something like that and Dagur's ships are too cumbersome for a journey. But our trappers were sent out weeks ago and are not due to arrive for another few weeks. However, I don't think a boat is necessary."

Alvin closed the distance between them. "What are you saying?"

Birdsong smirked. "I have been working close with Wildling, learning her secrets. I think after fourteen years in the Hatch, I'd know a thing or two myself about dragons. Let me ride to Berk and scout it out. No middle-man, and I know the area well. I can get there and back in a week's time."

"If there was a problem, they'd shoot you out of the sky," Alvin retorted.

"Not the dragon I'll be riding. I can stay above the clouds. This is just a preemptive step; you'd of course want to send out troops as soon as the storm season passes. The sailors and traders believe there will be quiet seas once the moon turns. That will be more than enough time for me to go there and return, and for you to properly prepare to attack once more, to purge the rest of the Berkians before the snow sets in."

"You really think this woman is capable?" Dagur snorted towards Alvin.

Birdsong scoffed at him and looked him up and down. "You two wouldn't get close to a dragon without it killing you. These creatures do, in fact, trust people, so I think after fifteen years in the Hatch, I'm a step ahead of you."

Alvin stepped between them and grabbed Birdsong's arms. He looked

into her eyes. "You really think this is the right thing to do?" he asked her quietly, cutting Dagur out of the conversation.

"I don't think there is another way," she replied gently.

"You won't let your past cloud your judgement?"

Birdsong smiled gently and she rested a hand on Alvin's cheek, but the memory came back to her mind as clear as the night it had happened:

It was dark. Clouds hung over Berk, and fire reflected off the heavy clouds sinisterly. Valka ran up the hill as fast as she could; Stoick had run off to defend the villagers. She rushed into her house, knowing she was being followed. She threw the door shut behind her and found Hiccup trying to look out the window.

_ "Hiccup!" _

He jumped violently and a little shrill gasp whistled into his tiny body. Valka wrapped her long fingers around his wrist and pulled him to the stairs. He tripped as he tried to keep up.

_ "Mama, what's going on?" Hiccup asked her. She didn't say anything as she ran up the stairs two at a time. She flew into the bedroom and let go of Hiccup, waving to the wall._

_ "Go to the bed," she barked. She grabbed the heavy door and slammed it shut. Hiccup backed away towards the wall, his heart racing. Valka whirled from the door and ran to the bed, beckoning Hiccup to follow her. She grabbed the bed frame and pulled back, grunting and straining against the weight. It scraped against the floor as it moved away from the wall. Something crashed against the door and Valka snapped her head around at the startling crash. Hiccup huddled behind her. "Mama?" _

_Valka turned quickly, grabbing Hiccup again. "Hush now my darling," she said quickly. "Get behind the bed, move!" _

_Hiccup whimpered. "Why?" _

_ "To keep you safe," she said, pushing him into the space. Hiccup crawled under the bed and looked up at her tearfully._

_ "I'm scared," he admitted. Valka grabbed her sword from her belt and unsheathed it, looking to the door. She looked back at him._

_ "Don't be, my sweet. Everything will be alright. Just â€“ just stay behind the bed and don't let anyone see you." _

_ "Are there dragons?" Hiccup asked. Valka shook her head quickly, her wide green eyes looking into his identical ones, her breaths ragged and quick._

_ "No, they're people, mean and evil people." _

_ Hiccup didn't understand. "What do you mean?" _

_ The thing smashed against the door again and Valka tore away from Hiccup. Hiccup reached after her._

_ "Wait mama!" he cried._

_ The door flew open and Hiccup cowered back, peeking under the bed as he shook like a leaf._

_ He didn't recognize the man he saw standing there, panting and sweating, grinning through his broken teeth._

_ "Alvin," Valka breathed. She backed away, sneering and putting herself between the bed and the enemy._

_ "Did you miss me?" he asked. Valka spat at his feet. Alvin frowned. "Now why would you do that?"_

_ "Should I start with the raid or something else?" Valka asked coldly. Alvin scoffed._

_ "Trivial things," he said with a shrug. "Stoick would understand." He glared at Valka and wrinkled his nose._

_ "Is this what this is all about?!" Valka shrieked._

_ "I don't know what you mean, love," Alvin sighed. "If you mean being exiled to a hostile wasteland with nothing but a pair of boots, then yes. If you mean being exiled because I raised my voice against your marriage, then yes."_

_ "You didn't raise your voice, you started killing people," Valka retorted. "And I'll remind you that I didn't choose Stoick and I didn't choose you. It was written and it will never change."_

_ Alvin growled. "It was my right!"_

_ "Your right?!" Valka gasped. "You lost any right to any claim when you betrayed our people and threatened their lives. Give it up."_

_ "No!" Alvin roared. Valka jumped back and Hiccup covered his ears. Alvin stormed forward. "I will never give it up! I will always come back, I will always remind you of what you've done to me, of what he's done to me!"_

_ Valka put up her sword and Alvin knocked it out of her hands with the back of a gloved fist. He grabbed her wrist and wrenched it over. She cried out and Alvin turned her body around and wrenched her arm up. She grunted as he pulled harder and harder, breathing into her ear._

_ "You can tell me all you want to give it up, but I have no intention to," he rumbled. Hiccup looked up at his mother from under the bed, who locked eyes with him. She tried to motion to him to conceal himself, but Alvin paused. He was looking at Hiccup._

_ He threw Valka to the side and hoisted the bed up. Valka screamed as Alvin grabbed Hiccup's hair and pulled him into the air. Hiccup shrieked and kicked and Alvin stared at him wriggling in his hands. Valka cried, covering her mouth, dropping to her knees._

_ "Is this yours?" Alvin asked slowly. He turned to Valka, who

refused to look away._

_ "Put him down, please put him down!"_

_ "Your son?" Alvin asked hoarsely. "You have a son?"_

_ Valka gritted her teeth. "He has nothing to do with this, please put him down!"_

_ "Mama!" Hiccup shrieked. Something in Alvin's eyes flickered â€“ hatred, rage â€“ and he stared at Valka with a furious torment behind his face._

_ "Funny how you've suddenly gone so soft," Alvin grunted. He tightened his grip in Hiccup's hair, and he sobbed and kicked. Valka gasped and scrambled to her feet. Alvin grabbed a dagger from his belt and brandished it under Hiccup's throat. Hiccup squirmed and Valka froze._

_ "Baby, don't move!" she screamed. Hiccup stopped the best he could, sobbing and neck throbbing. Alvin smiled._

_ "I haveâ€| your whole world in the palm of my hand, don't I?" he asked. Valka didn't take her eyes off Hiccup. "I could destroy youâ€| right now."_

_ "No, please!" she cried. Alvin shook his head and pressed the knife against Hiccup's skin. Valka tensed and jumped forward._

_ "Take me!"_

_ Alvin stopped and looked at her. He blinked and scowled.
"What?"_

_ Valka broke down slowly, breathing deeply and face contorting into miserable pain. "I'll go with you. I'll go wherever you go, I'll be with you for all eternity, just let him go!"_

_ The Outcast leader stared at her. Valka pleaded with him, a hand over her belly and the other reaching out to him._

_ "I promise, I'll never run from you, I'll be with you always."_

_ Alvin paused. He looked at Hiccup and Valka a couple times before tilting his chin at her. "You give me your word?"_

_ "Every word I know, I'll give," she promised._

_ "And you're mine?" he asked._

_ Valka sobbed and bit her lip, tears falling over her cheeks.
"Yes."_

_ Alvin dropped Hiccup. His knees buckled and his face smashed into the wood of the floor, his chin bouncing off the wood violently. Valka screamed and ran over to him, but Alvin grabbed her waist and threw her over his shoulder. The room began spinning around Hiccup, pain ebbing from a small cut on his chin to the back of his head, darkness crawling over him like a spider crawling over its

prey._

_ "Hiccup!" Valka screamed. "Hiccup!" _

Birdsong didn't waver as she smiled affectionately into Alvin's eyes. "My past is dead. I hardly remember. You saved me from Stoick. You saved me from the responsibility I had never wanted. I've always wanted to repay you for saving me, and this is the way I want to do it."

Alvin smiled into her hand and kissed it, holding against his scarred face.

"I love you," Birdsong continued. She softly kissed him and Dagur groaned, turning his back to the couple. "I'll be back before you know it, and I'll return your queen."

Alvin nodded and held Birdsong against him. "Be quick. I can hardly last a day without you."

Birdsong pulled away and gave him a nod before spinning on her heel and leaving the room. When the door was shut behind her, she wiped her mouth with the back of her hand, vowing to herself that she would never let that man touch her again.

In the Hatch, she found Astrid and dragged her into Stargazer's chambers, away from everyone except the three of them.

"The Cauldron they brought in had a saddle!" Astrid said after Valka shut the door. She ran up to Valka, but she was rummaging through cupboards and chests. "Did you catch a rider?"

"She almost ruined everything!" Valka hissed as she stuffed a water skin into her satchel. "Barb told them everything about Hiccup and the bond. They're preparing another attack."

Stargazer and Astrid quieted as Valka rubbed her forehead. She ran her fingers through her hair, smoothing her braid.

"They caught Barb as she was heading to the southern tribes. She told them about the bond, about the poison â€“ they're going to send more troops to scout the island. I managed to convince them to let me fly ahead."

Astrid helped Valka gather supplies. "Take me with you," she said quickly.

"No. If they see me smuggling you out, they'll send the ships out early. I managed to convince them to hold out for a little while, but that's nothing â€“"

"But why are they letting you go?" Astrid asked.

Valka sighed angrily and grabbed Astrid's arms. Panting, she looked at each of Astrid's eyes, trying to find the right words to say. She growled and shook her head.

"I have spent my entire fourteen years here posing as Alvin's lover," she confessed. Astrid lips parted as she tried to understand, disgust making the corners of her mouth twitch. "Fourteen shameful years that

I am not proud of, all getting ready for this moment. But Alvin trusts me more than any other person, and I am not above betraying that man's trust. I have to warn Hiccup and Rose before Alvin makes the first strike. I will send Hiccup and Rose to the dreamland, as you told me about, when I get there. You three will make a plan."

She snatched the last of the supplies she needed and opened the door roughly. Astrid flew after her, trying to keep up, as Valka ran back towards the Hatch.

"What am I supposed to do?" Astrid asked, her voice breaking.

Valka marched through the main hall of the Hatch. "Stay in the Hatch. Stay out of sight. Do not continue spreading word about the Saviour. Alvin knows who the Saviour is and I can't risk your life when I can't be here to protect you if you were to be caught. Barb only said you had the bond, not about your ties. Luckily, the idea of the bond is so ridiculous, Dagur and Alvin immediately rejected it."

"So we're just gonna stop trying?" Astrid asked through a strained whisper as they passed the other slaves of the Hatch. "I've barely regained my weight, I'm no where near ready!"

"Everyone, evacuate to your cells!" Valka commanded. "I'm bringing a rogue through here!"

Valka pulled her hood over her head as she and Astrid entered the hall leading to the male breeding dragons. Deprived of light, food, and water, the tortured creatures hissed and groaned as they passed. No women of child-bearing age were permitted around the male dragons, an insane rule enforced by Dagur to build up the creatures' angst before a Pit fight. Astrid followed hesitantly as Valka stormed forward, muttering under her breath.

"We shouldn't be down here," Astrid murmured quickly as she peered fearfully into the cells holding broken, injured, and hyper male dragons in chains.

"No," Valka responded sardonically. "Only Dagur's men and myself are allowed down here, because apparently, women set the male dragons into a frenzy." She turned around and walked backwards while looking at the ceiling. "Look at these rooms! The walls, the floors, the fire rooms, everything! You think Dagur and Alvin chose to spend time making the stone smooth?"

"You keep bringing this up!" Astrid remarked. "I'm trying to understand, but â€“"

Valka turned once more and continued her way down the hall, shaking her head and throwing her hands in the air in frustration.

"Tell me! What is it about this place that concerns you so much?"

Look harder.

Astrid stumbled and grabbed the wall next to her for support. A sudden wave of nausea battered her gut and she gasped for a breath. The voice reverberated through her mind from back to front, make her

vision flip onto itself. She grabbed her belly and a sweat began to bead on her forehead. Her blood grew hot.

You are blindâ€| to our world?

Astrid slowly, shakily, looked into the cell across the hall from her. Her hair fell into her face, and she closed her eyes, wincing. Visions of Whispering Deaths chained up behind the walls that surrounded her. They were all trying to speak to her, but their minds, fragmented, were too weak. The sound, the connection, disappeared.

"Come along, keep up!" Valka exclaimed. Astrid took a deep breath and push onwards, the halls spinning around her.

They made it to the last cell of the hall. Valka pulled her keys from her belt and deftly unlocked it. She heaved the door open and revealed the dragon. Astrid had never seen the kind before, but she marvelled at its strange beauty. Valka's face had let go of all her stress. It had been replaced by a gentle expression. She clicked her tongue, and the dragon opened its huge, yellow eyes, framed by the horns that protruded from its forehead. It looked like an owl, and it cocked its head to either side as Valka handed the keys to Astrid.

"Unlock his chains. He will not harm you."

Astrid hesitated, but she moved towards the mysterious dragon and unlocked the huge iron lock that connected every chain together. The lock popped open and the chains fell the floor with a liberating song of metal against stone, and the dragon unfurled his wings.

"This is a Stormcutter, the last of his kind," Valka mused as she raised a hand to him. He rested his face in her hand and blew air through his throat. "We found each other just after Rose was born, a hostage of Alvin when he first began trapping dragons. I have been taking care of him since then.

The Stormcutter glared up at Astrid, who stared back in amazement. "Youâ€| trained a dragon?"

"I trusted him," she replied. "Back on Berk, I always felt the hunt for the nest's queen was foolish. I always knew the killing of dragons was unnecessary, something Stoick and I always disagreed upon. I run the Hatch because of this creature, and I have tried to protect as many as I can since then." She raised an eyebrow and smiled slyly at Astrid. "Finding out my son and daughter both took after meâ€| well, I suppose Stoick can afford to be the black sheep in one aspect of his life."

She looked back up to her dragon. "Cloudjumper, we're leaving. I must fly to my family to warn them of what's coming."

The skyâ€| I haven't seen itâ€| in years.

Astrid repeated him for Valka, who nodded slowly. "Let us escape. Together."

She grabbed one of Cloudjumper's horns and the beast lifted her off the floor, swinging her onto his back. She looked to Astrid and

thought for a moment.

"The Underground was not built by man, Astrid," she said slowly. Astrid blinked, her heart beginning to beat faster. "It was here thousands of years before we sailed here and claimed it as our own. Every hall. Every room. Smoothed over time, far away from the selfishness of man."

Astrid looked behind Valka to the rest of the cell, and as if smoke were being blown away by a strong wind, the truth became clear, clear and horrifying. Valka nodded coldly and sternly as Astrid's lips parted with the realization. The halls were too grand to have been built by Dagur and Alvin, even with their men and slaves, like the smoothed rocks at the bottom of the Berkian cliffside.

"Wait, you mean â€""

"A nest," Valka said bleakly. "We are living as trespassers in one of the largest known dragon nests in the world. And it makes me wonderâ€ if this is indeed a nest, then where is its queen?"

39. Revealed

Four in a row! I can never thank you all enough - thank you to you newcomers and old-timers who keep up with this story and review it. You all remind me why I write, and it's amazing the support you have provided me. _

* * *

><p>Chapter Thirty Nine: Revealed

Astrid waited in the dreamland every night after Valka flew from the Underground three days ago. And every night, no sign of Hiccup. Either Valka hadn't made it to Berk yet, or Hiccup hadn't been able to sleep deeply enough to fully enter the cove. She wandered aimlessly under drugs Stargazer fed her each night, and tried to find Hiccup through the various bodies that appeared and disappeared.

"You're worried," her father murmured behind her on the third night. "Hiccup will come. Perhaps Valka has not arrived yet."

Astrid nodded, barely paying attention, as she watched Snowdrop run about, giggling as she chased something around the largest tree over and over again. She smiled as her heart throbbed in her chest. Snowdrop faded away almost as quickly as she had appeared, and Astrid's shoulders sank.

"What if something bad happens? What if we can't make a good enough plan? What if they can't get us out?"

"They won't get all of you out," her father admitted. "People will die. Dragons will die. How many is up to the gods."

Astrid growled and looked around the cove in frustration. She looked to the weaver, who continued to weave long blades of dragon nip with slender fingers. She looked away and, feeling lost once more, she sat down with a huff and waited for Hiccup stubbornly. She leaned back

against a large rock and closed her eyes. Even in the dreamland, she felt tired. These days, spreading the word of the Saviour and spending extra time in the Hatch to stay distracted had taken a toll on her. She sat in silence, listening to the lake's tiny waves lap against the gravel shore, one after the other.

Hiccup never came, and Astrid faded from the dreamland once more. She opened her eyes slowly and focussed on the ceiling above her before she sat up painfully. She groaned and Stargazer turned her head towards her.

"You're in pain?" she asked.

Astrid struggled to sit up and put a hand over her face. "My entire body hurts."

Stargazer frowned. "I told you I don't agree with putting you under the influence of the herbs too often."

Astrid didn't reply. She swung her legs over the edge of the bed and winced as her back, her chest, her gut, and her head all throbbed in pain. "It's the bed," she finally said. "Not the herbs."

"Or your moon approaches?" Stargazer asked delicately. "Maybe your body is preparing to bleed?"

Astrid looked up, a breath hinged in her throat. She clenched her jaw and looked to the floor, her eyes stinging. "I, uhâ€| don't bleed anymore."

Ever since the loss of her child, Astrid hadn't bled. Her organs, too damaged by the bond's creation, stopped flowing altogether. She placed a hand over her belly and felt tears burn her eyes. Stargazer sighed softly, an optimistic smile on her mouth.

"You will. The stress of this place has done much to the women of the Underground. Women come to me all the time asking about their moons, wondering where they went, butâ€| I'm sure it will come back."

Astrid shook her head, unconvinced. She knew in the darker corners of her heart her body was finished. It never bled consistently before the Underground, it was only a matter of time.

"When you were with Hiccup, did you ever try for a baby?" Stargazer suddenly asked. Astrid looked up, alarmed and offended.

"What?"

"Being the chief's wife must come with the responsibility of having an heir, yes?"

Astrid didn't say anything, too upset to reply. Stargazer waited for an answer for a moment before she stood and crossed the room to Astrid. She sat down next to her and sighed.

"When you first came here, I knew. Your belly felt different to me."

"Then why the hell would you ask?" Astrid asked angrily, a tear trickling down the side of her nose.

"I find talking helps more than not. I didn't tell Valka, I thought it would only upset her. Butâ€œ you know it's common for women to go through this, right?"

Astrid sniffed and wiped her cheek with her hand.

"Valka was younger than you when she tried having her first. She lost it within the first two moons. And with Hiccup, she began bleeding after four moons, and had to remain on bed rest until he was born. I myself lost two children before my second daughter."

"Hiccup was so devastated," Astrid murmured tearfully. "The day of the battle, he asked about it andâ€œ I couldn't give him a straight answer. I was so upset, Iâ€œ Iâ€œ!"

Stargazer wrapped her arms around Astrid and rocked her gently as Astrid stared onwards. She replayed the last conversation she'd had with him in person, how angry she got at him for asking. Stargazer sighed again and kept rocking Astrid back and forth.

"I know it's hard," she said, "and I'm sorry for bringing it up so suddenly. But maybeâ€œ maybe you lost it because the gods knew you would be here. Maybe it wasn't a good time to bring a child into the world."

"It's been almost eight moons since it was conceived," Astrid choked. "I should be huge right now, I should be building a cradle with Hiccup and making baby blankets and getting ready for my bed rest, I shouldn't be running around writing 'Saviour' in blood on the walls inside a dragon's nest wondering if I'm ever going to see him again!"

She stopped herself before she broke down. She couldn't speak anymore. She hated what the gods had chosen for her, even though she understood why they may have done it.

"It's like the eggs," Stargazer whispered into Astrid's ear comfortingly. Astrid leaned away and wiped her cheeks dry.

"What do mean?"

Stargazer cleared her throat and twisted her mouth. "It's hard to explain, butâ€œ babies have this very magical way of emerging when they're supposed to. They may be born earlier than usual, or later. But if it's not safe, those dragons won't hatch. I've been thinking about it since you came here, and it's the only explanation that makes sense. My second daughter, for example, refused to come out. I wondered for days, weeks, why she wouldn't drop."

Stargazer smiled, recalling the memory fondly. "Dragons were getting increasingly problematic. Raids every night, preparing for winter when food was scarce. My husband, Valhalla protect him, was out every night fighting them, worried sick about whether or not I'd give birth in the middle of a raid. But, fortunately, as soon as the first blizzard arrived, my daughter slipped out without a problem. The storm protected us for weeks. My eldest daughter, she was almost seventeen by then, she told me she wanted to name her after the first

snow and said 'Mum, after all this trouble, I want to name her' "

"â€" Snowdrop," Astrid breathed. Her eyes were wide, her face pale, her body leaning away from Stargazer in disbelief. She remained frozen in Stargazer's arms, her eyes fixed on Stargazer's bandages that tangled around her head, her mouth dry.

"â€|Yes. Snowdrop. How did you know that?" Stargazer asked innocently. Astrid tore away from Stargazer's grip, staring at her, murmuring nonsense and wavering dizzily. Fat tears filled her eyes and she stumbled back, her hand up in front of her.

"Wildling?" Stargazer asked.

"That's not my name," Astrid choked, her voice breaking.

"It's what I've been calling you, child," Stargazer frowned.

"No, I â€" you â€" your name isn't Stargazer, is it?"

"Well, it's what I am called. For my own protection, for the protection of my children."

Astrid grew ill once more. She grabbed her gut and spun around, hurling into a bucket by the fire. Stargazer stood quickly, confused.

That was her mother, Astrid screamed in her mind as her body shivered over the bucket. Her mother Sigourney, who had been taken three years ago, was Stargazer. She never recognized her under her bandages.

"Wildling? Have I upset you?"

Astrid stood shakily and ran to the door. She opened it and ran down the hallway. Why was she running? She didn't know, but she half-ran, half-walked back into the heart of the Hatch. She threw herself into one of the fire chambers. She stared at the eggs without expression as the fire licked the shells of the various eggs. Sometimes, if the light was at the right angle, she could see through the shell and see the silhouette of a dragonling, a tiny creature that didn't move or grow orâ€| anything. She berated herself for leaving her mother, confused. She didn't know her daughter was in the hatchery with her. She had no idea.

Shocked, Astrid stayed in the fire chamber until her cheeks burned and her eyes grew too dry to see. She gave her head a shake and she struggled to her feet. Her whole body, stiff and exhausted, strained to stand upright, but she pushed forward. She had to go back. She had to tell Stargazer â€" Sigourney â€" the truth. She wanted to hug her mother, she wanted to be reunited with her. Why the hell did she run?

She left the fire chamber after a while and slowly began the short walk back towards her room. The thought of her mother finding out both her children were alive made Astrid smile as she moved on, her cheeks healing. As she was about to enter the hallway, however, a man stepped in her way. A Berserker with a shaved head and a fire-scarred face barred her way. Astrid slowed and stopped nervously. She stared

at the man, an odd familiarity creeping into her skin, raising her hair.

She had seen this man before, in the dreamland, when she first travelled there. He had waded into the pond, floated on his back.

"Astrid," the man growled. "My leader has requested an audience with you."

Astrid swallowed nervously, flashes of the Saviour written in bloody runes tickling her mind. "Why?"

The man grabbed her roughly. Astrid gasped and another wave of nausea shot up her body. A pain burrowed into her lower back, a kink or a pull, and she tried to pull away.

"Wait, no!"

The man wrenched her over roughly. "If you come quietly, there won't a problem. Now come along."

Without any real choice in the matter, Astrid went with the man, looking over her shoulder towards the hall where Stargazer was. Her heart began racing as she left the safety of the Hatch.

The soldier took Astrid to the throne room, where she had been sorted into the hatchery by Birdsong moons beforehand. The guards opened the doors and the soldier pushed Astrid in, following her closely. When the doors shut, Astrid slowly looked up to Dagur, who was sitting in Alvin's throne.

"Nice to see you again, Astrid," he sneered. Astrid felt rage bubble within her gut. "It's been a while."

"You wanted to see me?"

Dagur sighed theatrically and stood from his throne. He descended the steps slowly, one by one.

"How are you?" he asked with a laugh. Astrid bit her cheek, her mouth pursed so hard, she thought it would break.

"Fine."

Dagur smiled and leaned back, impressed and surprised. "You mean to tell me that after your short time being here, you're gonna be civil towards me? Have you actually learned respect?"

Astrid didn't reply. One wrong move and she was dead, she knew it. She stood there with her hands behind her back and her eyes forward.

"I have taken responsibility of the hatchery in Birdsong's absence, so I will have to return shortly. Please," she struggled to say without emotion, "tell me what it is you want."

Dagur took another step down the stairs, his tongue in his cheek. "Oh, the list is endless. What does Dagur want? Well, I already have an armada. My father's assets. The Underground. You."

Astrid stared at him as calmly as she could.

"I had your friend. What was her name? Muttruff? Ruffnut? Doesn't matter, I had her. Shame she ended up being Hiccup's wife, when Birdsong killed her my heart truly sank."

A cold shock entered her stomach, frigid and sinister. It wasn't true, she told herself. Valka knew Astrid was Hiccup's wife. She wouldn't have killed Ruffnut. She composed her mind and gave a little shrug towards Dagur.

"You probably had your reasons."

Something flickered behind Dagur's eyes as he took another step down the throne steps. He gnashed his teeth and wrinkled his nose. He motioned to the soldier with the scarred face to leave. He lingered for a moment, looking at Astrid, before turning on his heel and leaving Astrid alone.

"I don't think you understand. Your friend? She was rotting away" "

"Dagur, you had your reasons. Now please tell me yours in relation to why I'm here."

Dagur growled, frustrated. "One of your leaders, Barb, was captured three days ago. She had these ramblings of a bond you have, some sort of strange magical tether you have with your dragon."

"Sounds wonderful," Astrid replied, disinterested. "Barb was always the crazy one. You should have seen what she was wearing at Hiccup's engagement ceremony."

Astrid's heart flipped as Dagur reached the final step. He slowly walked towards Astrid, who began to feel sick again. "It does sound crazy. Almost impossible. But you know what else is impossible? Surviving Outcast Orchid."

A breath caught in Astrid's throat, her eyes unwavering from Dagur's. The burn of the poison that had killed her, killed her child, lingered in her veins. Her jaw was clenched so hard, she thought her teeth would shatter.

"You know what it does?" he asked quietly, his tongue trailing across his lips pervertedly. "It reacts to the fluid inside of your stomach. It turns it into jelly, forcing your insides to bleed. Foam comes out of your mouth, like a rabid dog. Your eyes, your ears, your mouth overflows with blood as you slowly turn into nothing but a husk."

He circled around Astrid. He lifted a hand and trailed a single finger over her shoulders. She forced herself to remain still.

"Barb told us Hiccup was alive," he continued through a raspy whisper as he lifted Astrid's braid, feeling it with his fingertips. "I wouldn't have believed her if her dragon wasn't wearing a saddle. You Berkians are so simple, I wouldn't be surprised if he was the only one who made them."

He trailed his hand up Astrid's braid towards her head. Her chin

trembled slightly, but she clamped her jaw even tighter.

"But a funeralâ€| that sizeâ€| would have been reserved for nobility, or the wife of nobility. And let's be honest with each other, we both know Ruffnut would have never been allowed to marry Hiccup."

Tears prickled Astrid's eyes as she stared ahead. "Hiccup was allowed to choose his bride."

"And you're trying to tell me he would have picked her?" Dagur asked through a hoarse chuckle. "Come now, Astrid. We've met in the battlefield beforeâ€| you and your friends and I. Did he ever risk his life to save her? Noâ€|"

He put a cold hand on the back of her neck and he grinned, his tongue on his lip again.

"Besides, Ruffnut told us he didn't choose. So one of you is lying."

"And if we were? What then?" Astrid asked hoarsely.

"We're alone," Dagur replied, pressing his mouth against her cheek. "What do you think?"

Astrid grabbed Dagur's hand and twisted his wrist around, her scream filling the hall's every nook and cranny. He cried out as Astrid shoved him down, punching him the face with a closed fist once, twice, three times before he pulled his wrist back. He backhanded her and sent her spinning around. He kicked her in the lower back and she slammed into the floor, banging her head against the floor. She groaned, blood flowing from her eyebrow which had split open on the stone. Dagur laughed and walked up to her as she tried to crawl away.

He grabbed her braid and lifted her up, laughing hysterically. Astrid kicked her feet, but her back screamed in pain and every part of her body was shaking. Her stomach was hot, as she were being poisoned all over.

"Birdsong isn't here to protect you anymore," he chuckled in her ear. He threw her to the side and she hit the ground, rolling once and landing on her belly.

"Where's your Saviour now, Astrid?!" he shrieked. She rolled over onto her back as Dagur stalked over slowly. "I should have broke your fucking neck in front of the Great Hall that night," he tittered with another grin. "I would have done it, just a few more seconds and _snap_!"

He grabbed her by the throat again, just as he had done the night of the battle, and lifted her up. She grabbed his wrist, trying to pull his fingers away from her throat. But she felt the skin around her eyebrow move, and Dagur's eyes flicked up to it. His eyes widened as the gash closed slowly. He dropped Astrid to the ground again, and she gasped for a breath. Dagur crouched in front of her face and lifted her chin roughly.

"The crazy bitch was right," he spat through his teeth, his eyes searching Astrid's pale face for any sign of wounds. "Youâ€| you

healed. Right in front of my face!"

He lifted Astrid by the chin and called to the guards, who opened the doors again. The soldier with the scarred face ran in and stopped, staring between Dagur and Astrid.

"Dagurâ€| Alvin told you not to harm the girl," the soldier said angrily.

"I am not Alvin, do not confuse that oaf for me. He may care about the slaves he calls his people, but I don't. I am not here to rebuild a civilization, I am here to rule."

He smiled again before scowling in disgust towards Astrid. He threw her into the soldier's arms. "Take her to one of the Pit cells. She's going to give you a list of everything she'll need for tomorrow."

The soldier furrowed his eyebrows as he tried to keep a grip on Astrid, who could hardly stay upright. "What's tomorrow?"

"Astrid here is convinced that her beloved Hiccup, the Saviour, possesses great strength, the strength of a dragon. Let's see how he fares once I've levelled out the battlefield."

The soldier carried Astrid, cradling her with a stern look upon his mangled face. Dagur waved, blood trickling down his nose and his hair falling in front of his face. "And once you bond me to my Skrill, I'll be able to pluck Hiccup out of the sky and crush him to nothing but dust."

The man with the mangled face carried Astrid out of the main hall, leaving behind a brooding and giggling Dagur. Astrid felt like her body was nothing but a rock â€" stiff, hard, and solid â€" as the man carried her to the Pit.

"This is bad," the soldier whispered as he marched down the hallway. He found an empty cell and opened the door with one of his hands. He entered and rested her in the corner. Astrid squeaked in pain as he gently placed her on the floor. He leaned back and grabbed his waterskin and a handkerchief. He wetted it and dabbed the blood away from her skin. Astrid's face contorted into sorrow, and tears rolled over her twisted face as the man wiped her face clean.

"Don't cry," the man whispered as he wetted his handkerchief again. He looked up, pleading, as Astrid stared at the wall. "Justâ€| just tell me what you need."

"I don't know," Astrid sobbed, "I never did the bond. I've only seen it done once, I â€""

"Maybe you don't have to be successful," the soldier muttered. Astrid sucked in a breath and looked over to the soldier, alarmed. The soldier looked up, his face hard.

"I heard him yelling at you. I heard him mention the Saviour. The men are all talking about it in the shadows."

"Are you suggesting I murder him in front of his entire army?"

"No, I'm suggesting you try your best with this thing he's going to get you to do, and forget a step."

Astrid stared at the Berserker, dumbfounded. This was one of the unfamiliar faces in her dreamland, but a man loyal to Dagur. And he was obviously suggesting foul play.

"When he forced us to move here, he tore us away from our own families. Our homes. And anyone who crossed him!" He motioned to his face, and Astrid stared at the uneven skin that made half his face droop. "Let's just say there are a few people in his precious army that wouldn't mind a funeral some time soon. So. What will you need?"

"A knife," she replied sharply. "I'll need a knife, and I need you to spread a message to everyone."

"Anything, tell me."

"You tell everyone you can that Dagur is planning to murder Alvin, and you tell everyone that the Underground is a dragon's nest."

The soldier coughed, stunned, and he leaned in. "What?!"

"And get me a handful of sleeping herbs," she continued. "Do these things for me, and spread the Saviour's name. Get as many people as you can to talk about him, to write his name on the walls. Tell Stargazer where I am, and you tell every Berkian your men have captured that I have been taken and I am the heir to Berk. After Dagur's dead, we'll swarm the ships and get the hell out of here."

The soldier left quickly, and Astrid's shoulder sunk, exhaustion and pain overcoming her.

"It won't work," a raspy voice murmured in the corner. Astrid didn't have to look. She scoffed as rage overflowed within her. Barb sat in the corner, pale and sick and close to death.

"If I had my strength," Astrid seethed as she leered at Barb, "and an axe, I would kill you for what you've done."

"I was only trying to protect myself."

"You ruined everything. Every chance we had of ever seeing our husbands again."

Barb laughed darkly and shook her head. "As if Netmug would ever miss me!"

The two women sat far apart from each other, waiting until the soldier returned with the herbs. He reached through the bars and watched Astrid eat them as fast as she could. She entered the dreamland and spun around this way and that, trying to find Hiccup or Rose. No one was there. She grabbed a rock from the shoreline and used it to carve into the bark:

They have me. Dagur wants the bond. No access to sleep.
Hurry.

40. After All These Years

Looks like we're on a roll, guys! :)

* * *

><p>Chapter Forty: After All These Years

By the time Hiccup returned to Berk, dozens of trader ships had already docked. Matrons and people were unloading them as soldiers waited by the forge. When Hiccup appeared in the sky upon Toothless, he looked down over his village and felt his heart soar in the air with him when he saw barrels rolling up to his hungry villagers, and soldiers training in the fields again. People looked up and pointed at the Night Fury, who dove and landed gracefully in front of the Great Hall.

"Hiccup has returned!" a villager cried. Everyone else landed behind him. Cauli immediately left to the field to meet the soldiers and Netmug and Rose went to the Hangar. Hiccup stiffly dismounted and sighed, exhausted from his trip. Stoick pushed through the crowd and met Hiccup on the top stair, embracing him warmly.

"You said a week or two. Not two weeks and three days."

Hiccup shrugged a shoulder and smiled. "We chose to try for a few more traders. But we should have enough supplies to get us off the ground and armed. You look good," he noted.

Stoick had lost most of his weight when he was sleeping, but two weeks of eating more meat than he could ever handle managed to bring his mass up slightly, and he looked less sickly.

"Thanks. I've been lifting my sword every day a thousand times, so I at least have my sword arm back in a decent place. Small steps."

Hiccup smiled again, but something pained him in the back of his mind.

"I, uhâ€| I realized after we left that we never held a memorial for Snowdropâ€|"

Stoick's smile faltered and he cleared his throat. "I knowâ€| we can hold one tonight after the village eats. We don't have a boat to spare, butâ€|"

"Anything will be perfect," Hiccup said, his voice cracking. He took a deep breath and his dad smiled at him sadly. The thought of Snowdrop dying in the cold ocean made his heart ache beyond explanation. He took a deep, shaky breath and stepped away from his father. He turned to the village and met the villagers on the steps. Every one was happy to see him returned, and he greeted everyone fondly.

"Pa!"

Hiccup watched Swamplout shoved past the villagers in the Great Hall, his tiny arms reaching for Snotlout. Snoutlout jumped off Hookfang

and crouched, arms outstretched, as Swamplout crashed into him. Snotlout buried his face in Swamplout's shoulder and he breathed in the scent of his son. The child pulled away to kiss his father on the nose, and Snotlout held his son's cheek, smiling with complete and total adoration and love.

"You were gone for such a long time," Swamplout complained.

"I'm home now, son," he said. "Did you lose another tooth?!"

Hiccup swallowed painfully and walked past them, keeping his face down. He tried to not think about it, but the memory of losing his child loomed in the back of his mind.

It will not be in vain, Toothless said soothingly. When we get Astrid back, you can have that family.

Hiccup nodded stiffly. "I know budâ€œ! it's still hard."

Toothless bumped his arm with his snout, and Hiccup absentmindedly scratched him behind the fins. He looked to the docks as more and more people flooded up the Berkian hills towards the Great Hall. Dragons slithered about back and forth, sniffing at the scared newcomers.

They finally had enough people to attack, Hiccup thought, his heart skipping a beat. The final days of hiding were nearing an end; he would be flying out within the next few weeks to finally get Astrid out.

One of the patrolling riders landed in front of Hiccup, making him jump and stumble back. "Hiccup, we have a problem," he said quickly, roughly.

"What is it?" Hiccup asked, his heart skipping another beat.

"There's a ship approaching, a trapper. They're only a few minutes away, they'll be emerging from the fog anytime, now."

"You're sure this is a trapper?" Hiccup asked quickly. "We are expecting many ships today, possibly â€œ!"

"This is a trapper who works for Dagur. He has the Skrill crest upon his sails."

Hiccup's mouth went dry as he spun to the ocean. He leapt onto Toothless' back and looked to the rider. "Get everyone out of sight! We're not taking any chances!"

The rider grabbed his war horn and blew into it. It was small enough to make a sound only Berkians would hear, and everyone around Hiccup and the rider spun around and tripped over themselves. There was a moment of silence before the entire village flew into action.

Toothless shot into the sky as the rider soared to the docks. Hiccup hovered over the docks and people looked up at him.

"Everyone, run to the hall!"

People dropped whatever they were carrying, fleeing to the hall as fast as they could. Toothless sprinted and flew over to the Hangar. Rose ran out of the massive building as Hiccup landed. "Get those storm doors shut and lock the doors!"

Rose and Netmug, with help from a handful of Vikings, turned the massive wheels and cranks to shut the huge iron doors. Dragons flew in from the surrounding area as the doors shut. Hiccup nodded and heard Cauli barking orders to her men.

"Get to the trees!" she demanded. Hiccup flew ahead of them and landed at the top of his tree. He lie flat on Toothless' back, on his belly, as the last of the villagers hid. The soldiers hid behind trees and one tossed a bow up to Hiccup. He stared onward as he heard the doors of the Great Hall shut.

"We're just gonna sit here?" Tuffnut hissed over to Hiccup from another tree. Barf and Belch reared their heads nervously, and Hiccup waved at him to shut up.

"Once they see there's nothing here, they'll leave," Hiccup growled. "If they don't, we do as we planned."

Rose nodded and nocked an arrow over the bowstring, waiting in silence.

* * *

><p>Ruffnut held Snowdrop's hand as they saw the cliffs of Berk emerge from the foggy mist of the morning. Snowdrop gasped and pointed, bouncing in place, as Ruffnut marvelled at it.</p>

"Look, it's Berk!" Snowdrop cried. Ruffnut bit her lip as tears filled her eyes once more.

Home. After almost three moons, she was coming home. Her knees felt weak as she stared up at the beacons that surrounded the village, and for the first time, she noticed the details of them. Her heart soared as the ship sailed on, closing the endless distance between Berk and the girls. Eret smiled at them, looking over at them without them noticing. He had a home once. Gone now, he could only envy and appreciate their happiness.

"I'm not seeing any dragons," one of his men growled behind him, snapping Eret out of his reverie. Bronson, a slinky weasel of a young man with greasy brown hair, scowled and sneered at the empty skies.

Snowdrop looked over her shoulder to him. "They're shy. Don't worry, they're here."

Ruffnut squeezed Snowdrop's hand as she craned her neck to look at the Hangar. It wasn't there before, and the sheer size of it made her head dizzy. There were people here, she knew.

"See, no one is here." Snowdrop quipped to Eret. But Bronson didn't look convinced as he glared at the dozens of trading ships tied to the docks.

The ship docked and men jumped off with ropes to secure the ship. Eret grabbed Ruffnut's arm and pushed her onward. "Stay close to me," he told them. "I don't want any surprises."

"You're not gonna find any surprises," Snowdrop frowned. "Let go of her!"

"Not until we see some dragons, eh?" Bronson growled behind Eret's shoulder to the back of Eret's Ruffnut. "We brought you home in exchange for loot."

Snowdrop pouted up at Eret, who cringed and groaned awkwardly. He grabbed a rope tied to his belt and pulled Ruffnut's wrists together. She glared up at him and Eret sighed through loose lips. "It's just business," he muttered. Ruffnut swallowed as she watched the ropes encircle her frail, bone-thin wrists. She timidly looked up at Eret, who couldn't look at her.

When the rope was tied, Eret secured the rope back to his belt, tethering Ruffnut to him. He looked down at Snowdrop, who crossed her arms and scowled at him, her angry face framed by her frizzy blonde hair.

"What, you're gonna tie me up, too?"

Mehran and the other eleven men on Eret's ship all looked at each other. Bronson grabbed the rope from his own belt, but Eret raised a hand.

"I don't think tying up a four year old with a broken leg is necessary."

Snowdrop huffed and Ruffnut gave her a look to silence her before she opened her big mouth.

"It's fine," Ruffnut told her. "Come on, let's just go."

They left the ship with Stormfly limping behind her and Ruffnut finally felt the stability of the ground beneath her. She let Eret hold onto her arm, but she was more focussed on the trees, the buildingsâ€¦ Eret peered over at the broken foundations of houses that had been reduced to nothing but coals. The forge seemed to be the only thing intact, along with the Great Hall. Snowdrop looked around, confused. Why couldn't she see anyone? She gulped and limped on.

"Looks deserted," Mehran said happily. "A whole village to loot! Screw dragon trapping, if we can find enough stuff to sell, we'd never have to go back!"

Bronson crossed the docks slowly, eyeing the trading ships on the docks as a creeping feeling crawled into his gut. "Shut it."

As Snowdrop waddled over the docks towards the village with Eret and the rest of his crew in tow, Bronson jumped on one of the trading boats. There was a collection of barrels on board, and he grabbed one, dragging it away from the rest. He grabbed his knife and popped the lid open, throwing it to the side. He stared at its contents and his eyes widened, his mouth watering and his anger building all at once. He reached inside and grabbed a snow-apple from within. It was

fresh, not quite ripe. Bronson squeezed it, fuming.

Wary, Ruffnut led the men up the hill towards the Great Hall, following Snowdrop as she struggled up the frozen mud step after step.

"It looks destroyed," Mehran mumbled as he looked at the decimated ruins of the houses. Moss has already crawled up the edges and the men all solemnly looked around, pained expressions on their faces. Scorch marks scarred the grass in splatter formations, places where the Sun Sap had claimed helpless victims, melting them horrendously. Ruffnut could hardly look at them, feeling nauseous.

Snowdrop looked over the trees, trying to find the shapes of houses, and maybe people. She began to limp towards them and the men didn't think twice, too distracted by gazing over the abandoned and destroyed village.

"Stop!" Bronson barked from behind. Snowdrop jumped and everyone watched him as he stormed up the hill. "These girls have been lying to us!"

Ruffnut stood behind Eret and Snowdrop huddled behind her. The men all watched him as he vibrated in anger.

"We should return to the ship," Bronson spat.

Eret scoffed. "Every trip, Bronson! Every time you step foot on land, you have some sort of problem!"

"I found fresh food on them boats!" Bronson yelled back, thrusting a shaking finger back towards the boats. "Enough food to feed a lot of people!"

When no one offered Bronson any sort of comforts, he shoved through the crowd and grabbed Ruffnut. Everyone tried to jump on Bronson as Ruffnut screamed. Eret shoved Bronson back towards the trees, pulling Ruffnut behind him.

"Ruffnut is under our protection, we had a deal!" Mehran yelled to Bronson. But Bronson snatched Snowdrop and dragged her away. Everyone made a move to go after them, but Bronson pulled out his fishing knife, placing it under Snowdrop's chin.

"Wait!" Ruffnut shrieked. "Don't!"

"You've been lying to us this whole time, dragging us into your trap!" Bronson screamed.

"We do not threaten children!" Eret sneered at the man, but kept his distance. Of all his crew, he liked Bronson the least. "We are trappers, not murderers! Put your knife down!"

"I'll do it!" Bronson cried. "I'll do it, I swear!"

"Are you insane?!" Ruffnut hissed. She pulled against her restraints. "Do you want to die?!"

"We shouldn't have trusted you, Eret should have left you on that wreck!"

"Put your knife down unless you want to see all your men slaughtered! That is the sister to Hiccup's wife, his only family â€“"

"Bronson, think about what you're doing!"

"I am!" he screamed, making Snowdrop squeeze her eyes shut and burst into tears.

"STOP!"

Everyone froze and looked over Bronson's head as Tuffnut and Hiccup sprinted from the trees, their dragons in tow. Hiccup, eyes wide and arms outstretched, stumbled to a halt. He grabbed Tuffnut's arm to stop him from moving any further. A scream caught in Ruffnut's throat as Tuffnut locked eyes with her. Her knees went weak and she tried to move towards him, but Eret held her firm.

"Don't hurt her!" Hiccup cried, keeping his arms around Tuffnut.

"Ruffnut!" Tuffnut screamed. "I'll kill you if you touch her, I'll tear you apart!"

Eret leaned back, intimidated by Tuffnut's screams.

"Hup!" Snowdrop choked.

"We should leave," Eret said quickly. "We need to get out of here!"

"We're not going anywhere!" Bronson shrieked.

"Stop this madness!" Mehran yelled. "You're going to get us all killed!"

"No one is killing anyone!" Hiccup replied. "Let our sisters go and there won't be an issue. I promise!"

We should strike! Toothless yelled to Hiccup.

"You'd hit her, too," Hiccup muttered. "It's too â€“"

All of a sudden, a huge shadow flew overhead. Everyone looked up, cowering, including Hiccup and Tuffnut. Another dragon, unrecognizable, soared above them, spinning in the air and diving.

"They're attacking!" Bronson cried.

"No, we're not!" Hiccup screamed. "That's not us!"

The dragon fanned out his massive wings to stop him from diving. With two sets of talons, he grabbed Bronson's head and wrenched him up, lifting him kicking and screaming in the air. Hiccup leapt onto Toothless' back, locking his leg into place, as the dragon flew back into the air, bellowing. People rushed out from the trees behind Hiccup, alarmed and distraught.

"Snowdrop!"

The dragon flung Bronson like a rag-doll towards the docks, and Bronson lost his grip on Snowdrop's tiny body. She screamed as she soared through the air, and Toothless, like an arrow, shot after her. Just before she hit the ground, Toothless flew under her. Snowdrop crashed into Hiccup's arms, the air whooshing out of her and Hiccup scrambled to get a grip on her. He crushed her into his chest, holding her with one hand and holding the reins with the other, watching as Bronson broke every bone in his body over the docks, falling into the ocean.

"Hup!" Snowdrop managed to say as she tried to catch her breath. Hiccup held her tightly.

"You're alive," Hiccup breathed, relief washing over him like a stormy wave. "I love you so much, thank the gods, don't you ever, ever, do something that stupid again!"

Toothless flew around, and Hiccup watched the mysterious dragon land in front of everyone, who all gawked up at it. The dragon was unlike anything Hiccup had ever seen, but he saw a figure dismount off his bare back. Toothless landed tentatively between the dragon and the rest of the village, Eret and his crew included. Toothless' fans were pressed against his head, his teeth bared. Hiccup refused to let go of Snowdrop as he saw the rider walk around the massive creature, her hand trailing along his side. She was pale, thin, and her breaths were shallow as she looked up at Hiccup slowly.

"H-Hiccup," she breathed to him. Hiccup's eyes narrowed as he looked over the features of her face, the sound of her voice making his mind think back to a time he thought he had forgotten about. The woman looked over Hiccup's shoulder, her jagged breaths making her blink nervously. "Eret, let Ruffnut go."

Everyone watched as Eret hesitated before he pulled his knife and cut the ropes from her wrists. She stumbled away from him, giving him a small smile, before she turned and ran to Tuffnut.

Something prickled Eret's eyes as he watched Tuffnut run to her. Ruffnut sprinted for him, trying to keep herself from sobbing, before she crashed into his arms. Tuffnut buried his face in her shoulder, strangled sobs of relief tearing out of him painfully. He lifted Ruffnut off the ground and clutched her dearly, thanking every god he knew for her return. He even nodded to Eret, who blinked away a tear, hiding it away from the view of his crew.

The woman looked up at Hiccup with a pained smile. "You probably don't remember much of me."

"Iâ€| I don'tâ€| Iâ€|" Hiccup tried to find the words as he began to recognize certain features of her face. He swallowed his words, lost as the woman stared at him timidly. She bit her lower lip and looked away for a moment, a shaky breath flying out of her lungs.

Rose ran to Hiccup's side, skidding to a halt between them. A little sob hiccuped out of her lungs as the woman looked up with wide eyes full of tears. She smiled, making tears flow over her sharp cheeks. She held out a hand to Rose, who took it. The woman pulled Rose against her gently and Rose's face nestled itself into the woman's underarm. The woman sighed and kissed the top of Rose's head as she

locked eyes with Hiccup again, who finally understood.

"Mum?"

He dismounted, carrying Snowdrop on his hip. He stumbled forward, forgetting his leg was turned for flying and not for walking. He stumbled and almost fell forward before he set Snowdrop down. He pulled the tiny peg back to change his leg, and Valka watched him as he did it. He straightened his back and looked to Valka, who rocked Rose gently back and forth as little sobs were muffled by her clothing. She reached another hand to him and Hiccup surrounded his sister, his mother, in an embrace that felt warm, strong, and eternal.

Hiccup called off the alarm, and everyone left the safety of the trees. The Great Hall doors were opened and people streamed forth. Relief and happiness and laughter filled the cold air as Valka, Hiccup, and Rose climbed the hill. Eret and his crew had been surrounded by soldiers and were escorted to the hall by Cauli. Ruffnut laughed loudly and snorted at something Tuffnut said to her, and Eret snuck a peek in her direction. She looked over and accidentally caught his eye, but Eret looked away and cleared his throat.

* * *

><p>Valka tried to slow her heart as she craned her neck to look at the carvings of the Great Hall. Over twenty years ago, she remembered, she had married Stoick inside the building after the meadow had flooded after a storm. Tears had long dried upon her cheeks as her heart fluttered within her. Rose and Hiccup began to walk up the steps, but Valka stopped, staring at the first stone step.</p>

She was home. But for some reason, it felt alien to her. After years of being under the control of Alvin, of stone walls and iron doors, of dragons and people screaming as sun disappeared behind the island mountains. But here, the air was too clean. The stone steps were too safe. The people were too happy. She stared at her boots, standing on the worn soil, right in front of the steps.

She felt Cloudjumper coo behind her and rub against her back gently. Toothless nudged her hand and tongue hanging out, he groaned happily.

When the air went quiet once more, she lifted her chin slowly. At the top of the steps, Stoick stared down at her as if she were a ghost. He was thin, thinner than she had ever seen. His hair and beard had touches of grey, like her own hair, and wrinkles had turned his face older. But she recognized him, and her heart painfully hammered in her ribs.

"Val?" he asked barely above a whisper.

Valka lost her voice, too terrified to say anything. Hiccup and Rose looked at each other, worried.

Why was this so hard? Why couldn't she say anything to him?

Stoick descended the steps slowly, his eyes fixed upon Valka in

disbelief.

"I thoughtâ€|"

"You thought I was dead?" Valka suddenly retorted. Stoick caught his breath and stopped, poised near the top of the staircase. Why was she angry? Sorrowful, fiery tears filled her eyes and spilled over as she stared up at her husband. "Why didn't you come for me?"

The wind blew strands of Valka's hair over her face, into her quivering mouth and over her watery eyes. Hiccup and Rose averted their eyes, shifting uncomfortably.

"Fourteen years," Valka continued hoarsely. "Fourteen years, I waited."

Stoick's eyes slowly fell, his shocked face falling as Valka stared up at him.

"It wasn't fair," Valka said weakly. "It wasn't fair you gave up on me, that you moved on. That I had to hear about how our son grew through hateful updates between Alvin and his men. That I had to do terrible things to keep Rose and I alive while youâ€| forgot."

Stoick took another step, his eyes red. Valka sucked in a breath, a hand over her heart and another hand over her stomach.

"You promised me that you would never give up on me. You promised to fight for me."

Stoick winced as tears disappeared into his beard. His steps grew heavier, but he forced himself to move.

Valka closed her eyes and covered her face. This wasn't what she wanted. She had been thinking about this moment for years, of how it would be when they finally found each other again. But an unforeseen anger and sorrow had taken over her like fire over dry grass. She trembled like a child in winter, holding herself.

She felt a hand touch hers, gentle and calloused and familiar. Stoick pulled her hand away from her face and he cupped her cheek, tears covering his sallow face.

"I never moved on from you," he whispered to her. He kissed her forehead and a sob escaped through her teeth. She squeezed his hand as he held her face and Stoick pressed his forehead to hers. And when she breathed, she smelled his scent and sobbed again. She forgot the way he felt, the way he looked, the way he smelled. But she had him again. He held her gently and closed his eyes as Hiccup and Rose held them on either side, joining the family as a single entity for the first time in eternity.

41. Power

_Hello, everyone! Hopefully, this chapter posts without any glitches; yesterday, chappies 39 and 40 disappeared for a bit. They should be there now! Shout outs to everyone who keep reviewing the story as it reaches its peak; I am starting to recognize names, old and new, and

I am grateful to every single one of you. _

* * *

><p>Chapter Forty-One: Power

Astrid was shaken awake in the middle of the night by a pair of rough hands. Torn from the dreamland, she groaned and tried to open her eyes, but the sleeping draught lingered on her breath and in her blood.

"Get up," the man with the scarred face grunted.

"What?" Astrid mumbled drowsily. The soldier pursed his lips and lifted Astrid to her feet. An ache throbbed in Astrid's back, the same place Dagur had kicked her the night before. She held it as the soldier ushered her out of her cell.

"What's going on?" she asked groggily. The man didn't look at her, but as she woke up more and more, she noticed the man's jaw was clenched.

"Dagur wants the bond now, before the Underground wakes."

Astrid heard his words, but couldn't process them at first. But as she was pulled down the hall, she began to think clearly. "Waitâ€œ! noâ€œ!"

The man pulled her onwards, but with an apologetic look upon his mangled face. "We're out of time. I tried to warn Alvin about Dagur, but I couldn't get to him in time. We have no choice, he's already waiting in the Pit."

He dragged her on, and Astrid began recollecting her memories as fast as her exhausted brain would let her. Blood, venom â€œ a willing dragon â€œ andâ€œ| she didn't know the last step, when Rose had bonded Hiccup, she didn't remember much. She just woke up the next day andâ€œ|

Astrid limped forward, her heart racing beneath her skin. She could hardly breathe as they rushed through the darkened corridors, the stone floor raked with gouge marks from the claws of doomed dragons. The hall opened into the Pit, and the soldier led Astrid on. The Pit smelled the same as before: iron from the blood of men, women, and dragons. She wanted to retch as she remembered how Berkians were slaughtered right in front of bloodthirsty men, never given a fair chance to fight for their lives.

Dishonourable. Filthy. Gutless. She could already see Dagur standing with his back to her, with another handful of Berserker soldiers who were laughing with him. Behind him was Thorvane, who reared his chain-clad head, baring his teeth to Astrid.

Harbinger, he rumbled in her mind.

Astrid kept her eyes down as Dagur spun on his heel, greeting her with a sigh. He beckoned her forward. She reluctantly closed the gap between them and forced herself to look up.

"Ah! Have a nice nap?" he asked loudly. His voice echoed throughout

the empty arena, and Astrid stared daggers into his eyes. "A few hours enough to prepare?"

"I thought we were waiting until dawn," Astrid countered coldly.

"You thought wrong," Dagur spat in return through another one of his misshapen grins. "You look awful. You should work on that beauty sleep you Berkians trick yourselves with. I want that bond. Now."

"Why?" Astrid dared to ask. "I already told you, I don't know how."

"Oh, I think you do," Dagur said.

"No, you wish I did."

Dagur scowled at her and the man with the scarred face gave Astrid a nudge. Astrid closed her eyes and swallowed, and a tiny inkling of nausea flipped her stomach over.

"Butâ€|" Astrid forced herself to say. "I'll try. In return for my freedom."

"You don't get to ask for anything," Dagur scoffed.

"I do if I'm giving you all the power you desire. I give you the bond, you let me go."

Dagur twisted his mouth, nodding absentmindedly. "I suppose we could talk after the bond is complete."

Astrid sighed a shaky sigh, and the other soldiers looming behind Dagur all sneered and glared at her. She motioned for Dagur to get onto the table and the man with the scarred face handed her a knife. Dagur eyed it as he chewed on his cheek. "Is it going to hurt?" he asked sarcastically.

Astrid tentatively looked over, tearing herself from her gaunt reflection trapped in the steel blade.

"Have you ever been on fire?" Astrid replied sharply. "Because that would be a good comparison for how painful this is going to be."

"Aww, you're threatening me," he pouted.

"I'm informing you."

"Stop informing. Start doing."

Astrid clamped her mouth shut and, knife in hand, she passed the armed soldiers to Thorvane. She paused in front of him and squeezed her eyes shut again, her heart beating too fast for her to bear, her guts tangled in knots. The beast loomed over her as she struggled to remember what Rose had said. Dragon's blood and dragon's venom, willing.

The dragon lowered his head and stared into her eyes with one of

his.

You are scared.

If I fail, they will kill me.

If you fail, I will protect you, the Skrill said as spittle drooled from his mouth, landing sloppily into Astrid's hand. The chains had already sliced into Thorvane's snout, and Astrid gently ran her fingers over one. She rubbed the saliva and blood between her trembling fingers and ran them over the blade. She slowly turned back to Dagur, who looked at her with his tongue between his teeth.

"What are you going to do with that knife?" Dagur asked with a low, rumbling voice as Astrid stepped in front of him. She grabbed his hand and lifted it. She pressed the knife over palm and pulled quickly. Blood flowed forth and Dagur winced. His body shuddered and he groaned. Astrid swallowed as she picked up the other hand, slashing it open. When she had done that, she pulled away and nervously looked up at Dagur's men, who all muttered to each other, confused.

"I don't feel different," Dagur complained.

"It takes time for it to work," she replied tightly.

Dagur squeezed his hands shut and he closed his eyes, waiting for something to happen. He opened them and glared at her.

"Why isn't it working?" he asked roughly.

"Give it time!" Astrid replied.

Silence filled the room and Astrid watched Dagur attempt to be patient. He bounced in place and opened his hand, checking to see if anything had changed. The men eventually grew bored and they began to mutter to each other against one of the walls as Astrid and Dagur stared at each other, waiting. Dagur cocked his head towards Astrid, who didn't take her eyes off him.

"You have no idea how liberating it is to have you here."

Astrid ground her teeth together, but she raised an eyebrow as Dagur continued through a laboured sigh.

"After years of trying to capture that pesky Night Furyâ€| after being scorned over and over by you and your stupid little friendsâ€| to have one dead and another under my control isâ€| really, really, satisfying."

Astrid bit the tip of her tongue, refusing to open her mouth and speak to him.

"What was it like?" he asked quietly, sinisterly. "I've never had anyone survive Outcast Orchid. How did it feel?"

Astrid's eyes burned, but she said nothing. Dagur, however, could read the experience on her face as clear as day.

Dagur raised his eyebrows, nodding to himself, praising himself. "You

should have seen how my father took it," he laughed. "To see him drop to the floor like a rockâ€œ to have everything change so quickly."

"Why would that bring you any joy?"

"He was going to sell our honour for a peace treaty. Every decision he made, it was for the benefit of the ungrateful, not his own people. Everything I found, he rejected. He said Sun Sap belonged in the Underground, not used as a weapon. But I have conquered cultures with it. He said Outcast Orchids should be torn from the soil and burned, but I brought Berserkers safety from persecution from chiefs who wanted us killed. He said dragons in chains were weak. Look how wrong he was!"

Dagur chuckled. "Hiccup was weak. He always said you couldn't train a Whispering Death, or a Skrill. He probably didn't think I could train bigger, better dragons than that."

Astrid gulped, but her blood began to warm. Thorvane lowered his head as Dagur tried to read Astrid's face again.

"Where is the queen?" Astrid asked. Dagur stopped laughing, and he looked at Astrid with a questioning glare.

"I never said anything about a queen."

"I know this is a nest, and I know the queen is still alive."

"What makes you say that?"

"Because there is no body, and if there was, it would be your trophy."

"You think I would tell you?" Dagur retorted. "My father and I spent the last of Berserkian resources to make sure she wouldn't bother us ever again. She's more worth it alive than dead."

"Coming from a heartless, cold-blooded killer like you would make me laugh if I was in a better mood."

Dagur was about to yell at her before he faltered. He hiccuped and shuddered, lowering his head slowly.

"More."

Astrid, startled, stepped back. "What?"

Dagur jumped from the table and he grabbed Astrid's hand holding the knife. "I can't wait anymore. I need to feel it."

She looked between his eyes and noticed his irises shift slightly, a small vibration. "I thinkâ€œ you already are."

"No, I'm not," Dagur spat. He pulled his leather vest off his body and threw it to one of his men. He ripped his shirt open, sweat already creating a sheen over his skin. "Cut me again," he growled.

"Dagur â€œ"

"DO IT!" he shrieked. Astrid jumped and gasped through her nose. She jumped and almost involuntarily slashed the knife across his skin out of sheer reflex. A clean gash split open over his slimy skin, and hot blood spilled forth. Red dribbles dripped down from his chest onto his stomach, and he looked at it as he panted through clenched teeth.

"Are you â€“"

"It will heal," Dagur sneered. He groaned and his eyes fluttered. Thorvane growled through his throat, and his tail whipped around angrily. "It's working."

The man with the scarred face snapped his gaze to her. Astrid had the same thought as her mouth went dry. How was it working?! This wasn't supposed to happen, why the hell was he already changing? Dagur laughed as sweat dripped off his face and onto his knees. Steam began to rise from his back and everyone took a step back as Dagur began laughing, wave after wave of heat pouring over him like Sun Sap.

You must not touch him! Thorvane cried in Astrid's mind as he slinked away, shaking his head back and forth. It would complete the bond, do not touch him!

"No, you weren't supposed to be willing," Astrid breathed, realizing Thorvane's mistake.

Astrid stumbled back as blood burst from his mouth, just like when Hiccup had been bonded. He fell back onto the table, his eyes fluttering back, choking and coughing.

"You're killing him!" one of the soldiers yelled at her.

"This is what's supposed to happen!" Astrid stammered as the men stormed towards her. "It's all part of the ritual!"

I didn't expect this â€“ this â€“ feeling, Thorvane struggled to say. He shuddered and scuttled back, whining. Get him out of my head!

"You're lying," another soldier yelled. "Mikhael, grab her!"

The man with the scarred face, Mikhael, raised his arms. "This is supposed to happen. Calm down!"

A soldier grabbed Mikhael and dragged him around. "You dare disobey direct orders?!"

Another soldier grabbed Astrid's arm as she moved to help Mikhael, and she screamed. The soldier dragged her towards Dagur's still body, and she wriggled against him, dropping the knife.

"Mikhael!" she shrieked. "Don't let me touch him! Don't let me touch him!"

Mikhael locked eyes with her as the soldier lifted her kicking and screaming. He shoved the soldier back and ran to Astrid, getting between her and Dagur.

"Stop this," he told his fellow soldier, holding a hand out. The soldier grabbed his collar and threw him back. Mikhael stumbled and his arms flailed back to catch himself. Astrid's breath caught and Thorvane screamed.

"Mikhael!" Astrid screamed. But Mikhael's hand landed on Dagur's chest.

It felt like the air had been sucked out of the entire Underground. No one could breathe for a split second of absolute silence before Mikhael erupted with a fit of tortured screams. They echoed through the empty Pit as a force exploded from him. Everyone stumbled back as a blinding light beneath Mikhael's hand scorched the eyes of anyone who stared too long. Soldiers stumbled back, clawing at their eyes as they burned from the light. Mikhael wailed as his body flaked away like dried rose petals. Three more explosions of force burst from the pair. Everyone flew back, slamming into the walls all around. Astrid's back careened into the wall and she crumpled onto the floor. Pain ricocheted up her body, sending her into agony, a scream caught in her throat.

* * *

><p>The dreamland shuddered violently and suddenly. The lake sloshed over the shore and the tree swayed, creaking dangerously. Dagur appeared, grabbing his own face and stumbling about as demons and shadows filled his mind. Hundreds of thousands of voices slammed into his head all at once and his skin felt as if it were on fire. He howled as he pulled on his hair, trying to shut up the noise.</p>

He covered his ears and shrieked and cried, stumbling in circles as he looked around himself with bloody teeth, trying to recognize his surroundings, his breaths deep and growling, saliva foaming from his mouth. The clouds overhead turned black and wind howled around him. Dagur howled one more time before he sank to his knees and disappeared.

The wind vanished with Dagur and the cove went quiet once more. Astrid's father looked around himself, his eyes wide and eyebrows raised to his hairline. He shuddered and shrugged. Must have been a freak apparition, he decided. But the weaver had stopped weaving her rope, and she clenched her teeth, her heart pounding in her chest as she closed her eyes.

* * *

><p>Dagur wheezed and panted as he stood, watching his hands slowly heal themselves. He shuddered and moaned as his skin closed the gash across his chest. He looked around himself, his vision clearer than he ever thought possible. He could smell the rank musk of the Pit, as if he could smell each individual layer of blood spatter throughout the past year.</p>

His head flicked back and forth as he found the bodies of his soldiers. All had been obliterated by the bond's completion, crumpled in odd angles, unmoving. Dagur grinned, and he cracked his neck, feeling a wave of heat wash over him. He sighed and stretched. No more pain. No more weakness.

Dagur.

Dagur jumped and held his head, a strangled cry escaping from his mouth, as Thorvane lumbered up to him, step by step.

"Thorvane?"

The bondâ€| was successful._

Dagur smiled again and he laughed through his nose. And as much as Thorvane wanted to strike out and paint the Pit walls with Dagur's blood, the wish to kill him slowly faded. Rage filled and ensnared Thorvane, taking him over and replacing any kind thoughts, any memories, everything he ever had, with Dagur's thoughts and desires. Dagur, with the four aspects of a single human, had done what Rose had never even pondered. He had entirely taken over a dragon's will with his own, like an alpha leads a pack, and Thorvane forever forgot the names of the Saviour, the Spirit Weaver, and the Harbinger.

Astrid stirred and Dagur smiled again. She struggled to her knees before Dagur grabbed her face and hoisted her up above him. She weakly kicked her feet and opened her eyes, blood caked in her hair as a head wound tried to close.

"You weigh nothing to me, now," he smirked in her face. "I feel no restriction. No limit. I feel nothing. Nothing but what the gods feel."

He gnashed his teeth in her face as she looked down at him with wide eyes, terrified as she held onto his arm for dear life.

"Alvinâ€| is going to be sorry that he ever doubted me," he whispered. "And once the entire Underground watches you burn, I'm going after Hiccup. And Thorvane is going to tear Toothless' wings off like parchment."

Dagur threw Astrid in her cell, and Astrid crawled to the wall, a hand over her stomach as she struggled for air. She only wheezed as wounds closed slowly.

"Astrid!" a small, shaky voice squeaked in the corner. Astrid could barely think. But comforting arms wrapped around her tightly, and pulled her against a warm body that smelled like herbs and dried flowers.

"Baby, can you hear me? Astrid?"

Astrid looked up and could make out the faint outlines of Stargazer's bandaged head above hers.

"Whatâ€| are youâ€| noâ€|"

"When I found out they took you, Iâ€| I had to be with you, when you left, I realized â€""

Stargazer covered her mouth as she began to cry, cradling Astrid in her arms, trying to hold her without hurting her.

"You have to get out," she choked.

"I'm not going anywhere," Stargazer murmured into Astrid's hair.

"My whole body hurts," Astrid whimpered, trying to catch a breath.

"Shh, it's okay. I'm here now."

Stargazer placed a hand over Astrid's hair, and she smoothed it with a shaky hand, taking a jagged breath as she bit her lip. Astrid reached up and weakly clasped her mother's arm as tears flooded her eyes.

"I did a terrible thing," she weeped. Stargazer shook her head lovingly. "He's going to kill us all."

"No, my sweet. The Saviour is coming, and he's going to take us home to Snowdrop and you're going to give me the most beautiful grandchildren."

"I don't know anymore," Astrid cried. "What's going to happen to us?"

"We're going to be fine," Stargazer replied quickly as she looked up the cell door. "We're going home and we're going to rebuild our lives."

"Did you know this place was a nest?"

"Birdsong told me long ago. It was how I figured out what was wrong with the eggs. Things like Sun Sap only grow on nest sites, to keep the queen warm in the winter. Your father and I explored the Red Death nest after her fall just before I had your sister and it was everywhere within the fortress."

They hushed as a soldier passed them, and Astrid groaned, holding herself. Stargazer lifted her, placing Astrid's head under her chin.

"We're going to be okay," Stargazer breathed. "We're going to be okay."

42. The Valkyrie

Here comes another update! However, in light of the previous chappie, I'd like to make a teeny-tiny request. I love your reviews and I absolutely adore what you all think - just make sure to **not reveal spoilers** in case new readers read them before they read the story. _

Most of you can probably tell we're heading towards the end of this journey, so let's surprise anyone who may join us on this adventure. But please! **PM me **if you want to rant about specific points in the story and I'd be more than happy to reply to each and every one of you. Reviews are, of course, encouraged and appreciated. Just make sure you're not doing all the work for someone else by spilling the beans. ;)_

* * *

><p>Chapter Forty-Two: The Valkyrie

Hiccup, Rose, Valka, and Stoick all sat at the Great Hall's table, feasting for the first time since the Battle of Berk. They filled their bellies and shared stories of Hiccup and Rose to each other in an attempt to catch up after fourteen years of separation. Hiccup and Rose were laughing so hard at a comment Valka had said about Stoick on their wedding night, Hiccup's side ached and Rose broke into an unstoppable fit of snorting while everyone smiled, chuckled, and shook their heads at the reunited family.

It was the first time Hiccup had laughed that hard inâ€¢ he couldn't remember. On top of that, the hall was full of people and food for once. Hiccup calmed himself from his laughter and Rose covered her mouth as Valka slyly nibbled on her bread. Stoick had resorted to a fit of bumbling, embarrassed at what Valka had said, which made Hiccup laugh again.

Rose drank out of her horn and wiped her mouth with the back of her hand as Hiccup leaned over towards his mother.

"So I've never seen the kind of dragon you fly," he noted.

"Cloudjumper is the last of his kind," Valka replied sadly. "I think he hatched an oddball, kind of like a Screaming Death born out of a Whispering Death mother."

"Toothless is the same. Before everything flipped upside down, I wanted to find a friend for Toothless, butâ€¢ well, things flipped upside down."

Valka smiled empathetically as she placed her hand over his. She gave it a squeeze as Rose looked outside the hall doors, her eyes lingering on the moon. It was getting full, she noticed. She narrowed her eyes to see it clearer, still smiling at the happy conversation the family shared. But something warm trickled over her upper lip. She casually wiped it with her hand, but when blood showed on her knuckle, she paused. She furrowed her brows, a cold feeling entering her gut, as another drop of blood dripped onto the table.

Hiccup looked across at her and his smile dropped. "Rose?"

Rose didn't reply. Her eyes were vacant, her hand and face frozen as if she were lost in a dream. Valka reached across as Stoick turned to look at her.

"Rose?" Hiccup asked again. He stood and reached across the table, resting a hand on her shoulder.

* * *

><p>The dreamland shuddered violently and suddenly, making Rose stumble and fall to a knee. She looked to the sky in alarm. Dagur appeared, staggering forward with his fingers tangled in his hair, screaming and cursing and howling. Rose scrambled to the other side of the tree and pressed herself flat against it. Dagur stumbled forward and fell to his knees, and just as fast as he'd arrived, he

was gone.<p>

The cove melted away into nothing. Rose spun around, trying to focus on something. Voices surrounded her and faded in and out of her mind, bombarding her from every direction.

_ "I feel no restriction. No limit. I feel nothing. Nothing but what the gods feel." _

Rose covered her ears, wanting to scream, as blood trickled over her lips from her nose into her mouth. Flashes of Astrid cutting Dagur open with a bloody knife slammed into her head over and over.

_ "And once the entire Underground watches you burn, I'm going after Hiccup. And Thorvane is going to tear Toothless' wings off like parchment." _

Rose fell to her knees as the wind howled around her so severely, it felt it was trying to undress her. Astrid bonded Dagur to a Skrill, the sight of him throwing Astrid into a cell. The vision of Mikhael's body blowing apart, his four aspects filling Dagur to complete the bond.

The wind disappeared, and Rose reared her head, looking into an endless stream of darkness. She couldn't see anything in the cloak of black, until a beam of light appeared behind her. She turned and scurried back on her backside, terrified, shielding the rays of white light from her eyes. A figure stood ahead, silhouetted in the light. It walked towards her, reaching out to her, a slender hand of milky white.

"What do you want with me?" Rose asked, her head pounding as blood dripped onto her shirt.

The figure said nothing as it glided across a floor made of glassy water. It wore robes of a magical fabric, changing colours from green to blue at any shift in angle. It circled Rose, staring at her with a blank face.

_ "Spirit Weaver," _ the figure whispered. The figure waved a hand, and a vision filled the sky.

The dark room transformed into a memory. Rose stood slowly in absolute awe as the black space above her turned into a night of endless stars, and the ground below her bloomed into a healthy meadow. The flowers glowed all around her and filled Rose with a feeling of security, warmthâ€|

The Gate of Valhalla. Rose marvelled at the beautiful sky above her, wanting to reach out and touch a star that seemed so close to her hand. She stopped before she did, seeing the figure staring at her. She motioned a hand behind Rose, pointing a finger. Rose turned slowly, the traces of her smile fading. She wiped the back of her hand against her nose as her gaze fell upon a body.

It was Astrid the night she had been poisonedâ€| she was floating towards the stars of Valhalla, about to die, about to fade. Her feet left the ground and she smiled as her body fell back gracefully, bearing her body to the stars above.

But something below her stopped her. The stars shuddered and she felt something tug against her in her lower back. It was as if a rope or a wire was tied around her spine at its base and refused to let her float up.

The rope faded in and out of Rose's vision. It was like a star; if she looked at it too long, she couldn't see it. But the figure pointed to the space between Astrid and the magical pond beneath her, a shadow flickered into sight. A tether made of woven strands of dragon nip and grass prevented Astrid from floating away, secured inside Astrid's body.

Rose didn't understand. She looked back up to the figure slowly, her heart skipping a beat. "Why are you showing me this?"

The figure said nothing, but it waved again, changing the image once more. The stars disappeared and turned into a black sky. Storm clouds loomed overhead, kissed with the soft tinge of orange as Berk burned. Trees grew from the ground and created a forest around Rose and the figure. Rose narrowed her eyes—she had been here before—

They were in the Berkian forest, the sounds of battle muffled by the trees. Hiccup's voice faded into the back of Rose's mind. She jumped and turned again, a gasp caught in her throat. She saw Hiccup, his body wet from the river after his leg had been burned by Sun Sap, staring at a younger version of herself, his body vibrating with rage. Rose watched Hiccup confront herself three moons ago, his words scarring her mind.

"You could have told us about the poison, about Alvin and everything! Astrid wouldn't have been poisoned, we wouldn't have lost our — I mean, none of this would have happened if you just said something!"

"Lost what?" Rose asked quickly. Hiccup didn't hear her.

"And why me?!"

"What did you lose?"

The forest morphed and trees began to cave in around the figure. It turned its head to stare down at Rose, who stared ahead at Hiccup, who continued to scream at her until Rose could hear no more. When the vision faded, Rose didn't move. Her hands were clenched into fists, ice filling her stomach.

* * *

><p>Rose slumped out of her chair and crashed onto the floor. Everyone stood and Hiccup jumped over the table. He crawled over her and cradled her head, giving her limp body a shake. Valka and Stoick surrounded the pair of them, their hands hovering over her body.<p>

"Rose!" Hiccup cried. "Rose!"

Rose's eyes rolled to the back of her head as blood trickled from her nostril down the side of her face. Her red eyelashes fluttered and her head lolled back and forth.

"What's happening?" Stoick asked quickly.

Hiccup lifted her into his arms, tossing her lightly to get a proper grip under her back and legs. Valka supported her head and the villagers all jumped out of the way as they walked from the hall towards the conference room.

"She's having a vision," Hiccup grunted as Stoick shoved the door open. His bed was still set up inside, and they rested Rose's frail figure under the furs. Valka cupped her face and cleaned Rose's cheek with her thumb, but more blood flowed forth.

"She's still bleeding," Valka muttered worriedly. She grabbed a clean handkerchief from her sleeve and placed it over her face.

"I'll send for Juniper," Stoick grunted, leaving the room. Valka looked up to Hiccup, who refused to tear his eyes away from his sister. He grabbed Rose's hand and gave it a squeeze.

* * *

><p>The figure waved its hand one more time, changing the image back a few hours. The sun soared through the air until it stopped high above the Great Hall. Rose looked around herself, spinning in slow circles, as she tried to place herself. Unlike the other visions, Rose was unable to remember this placeâ€¦ she craned her head to look up the Great Hall's side, and she looked up to the figure.</p>

_ "Is it gone?" _

Rose jumped as Hiccup appeared. He stared above Rose's head, his words echoing in the memory. Rose turned to see where he was looking, and glimpsed Astrid glaring back at Hiccup.

_ "I don't know, Hiccup," she said firmly._

Rose's head turned this way and that, her chest throbbing with her racing heart.

_ "You've always known," he argued._

_ "Well, I don't," Astrid hissed._

_ Hiccup didn't move, but she could see the tears welling up above his lower eyelashes. He was trying so hard to remain passive._

Rose backed away from Hiccup as she watched tears spill over and cover her face. She backed into the figure. She jumped and squeaked, snapping her head up to face it as the figure placed a hand on her shoulder.

_ "You don't look upset," he muttered, heartbroken. Astrid's heart seized within her chest and she felt the sting of his words._

_ "I don't have time," Astrid said as she clenched her teeth._

The figure held Rose's stare as Hiccup and Astrid yelled at each other. Rose watched Rose stare at the image with a shocked expression contorting her face. "Waitâ€¦"

* * *

><p>Rose coughed, tiny droplets of blood wetting Hiccup's cheek. Valka and Hiccup quickly pulled her upright into a sitting position to prevent the blood from her nose to pool in her throat. Her head slumped forward and rocked from side to side. Valka winced and pulled the hanky away from Rose's face, waving her hand in pain.</p>

"She's burning up," she cursed. "It's never been this bad, has it?"

Hiccup shook his head. "Let me."

He grabbed the handkerchief and pressed it under Rose's nose. He hissed as her fiery skin burned his fingertips, but he endured. Dragon bonds created the warmest of fevers, and sweat pooled over Rose's back. Her shirt clung to her skin as she began shivering, her eyes still fluttering rapidly.

* * *

><p>Rose stared between Hiccup and Astrid as Hiccup's face contorted into pain. He threw his hands in the air and waved them about, and Rose cowered slightly as it became hard to breathe.</p>

_ "You always do that," Hiccup spat._

_ Astrid pursed her lips. "What?"_

_ Hiccup flapped his hands about unnecessarily, angry and biting back tears. "You always pretend that nothing gets to you!"_

_ Rose stumbled back, staring up as the image surrounded her, screaming at her the answers she had been looking for._

_ "As if the possibility of losing our child means nothing!"_

"Noâ€|" Rose whimpered. Tears had covered her face, even though she didn't feel she was crying. The figure watched the image as it continued, voices echoing in and out of Rose's head.

_ Astrid stared at him, mouth open and eyes wide. "I never said that. You think I asked for this?"_

_ "No!" Hiccup countered. "But it would be nice for you to show me an emotion that made sense!"_

_ Astrid shoved him back, her heart aching. "Shut up!" she shrieked. No one was around, but if they were, she didn't care. Hiccup paled and stepped back. "I felt my soul get torn away from my body! Do I know if it's still there? No, I don't! And frankly, I don't want to know. Not right now. Not today! I can't handle any more shit today! Okay?!"_

_ She slapped her hands over her mouth to shut herself up. Her face was wet, her body shook, her blood burned. Hiccup clamped his mouth shut and sucked in a breath. "Astrid, gods, I'm sorry."_

_ Astrid shook her head and raised a hand, shutting him up, almost

ashamed of him, almost ready to walk away._

_ "If anything happens, if they come for us, if they try to take Berk, you have to make sure you come out of it alive. You fly to the cove with Toothless, pretend you're dead, anything to make them turn tail and have no reason to stay." _

_ She said it without room for question. She couldn't get upset yet. She was almost certain about its fate. Her scarred body couldn't keep it, but to think of thatâ€| there was too much shit heading their way for her to think about that. To grieve would risk everything._

The image disappeared and silence filled Rose's being, filling her with emptiness. She couldn't move. She couldn't speak. Only strangled, incoherent noises left her throat.

* * *

><p>Hiccup growled and tossed the soaked square of fabric over his shoulder. He grabbed the hem of his shirt and placed it under her face as her nose flowed freely, coating everything in red.<p>

"Rose!" he yelled, trying to wake her up. "Can you hear me?! Rose!"

* * *

><p>The figure stared at Rose as she trembled in place, surrounded by emptiness. A distant voice filled her head once more, with no image accompanying it.<p>

_ "Astrid was so far in death that I had to give more in order to save her. Two parts of my being went in her place, hovering in limbo until I die to appease the gods." _

And nothing. There were no more voices, no more images. Rose stood there shellshocked and afraid. She wrapped her hands around herself. She tried to breathe but no air would come.

The figure walked behind her, brushing against Rose's back. Rose closed her eyes and she sobbed through her teeth.

* * *

><p>Juniper rushed in behind Stoick, and Valka jumped out of the way. She was about to press her hands to Rose's skin before Hiccup waved her away.<p>

"Don't touch her, you'll burn!"

Rose twitched, a moan escaping her lips, her skin pale and clammy.

* * *

><p>The figure stepped in front of her and Rose looked up at its face. Green eyes looked down on her and Rose's lower lip trembled. A voice gently entered her mind, but the figure's mouth didn't move. Rose heard the creature speak, and her eyes widened, a single tear falling from her eye down her face.<p>

Rose's head snapped up suddenly, startling everyone around her. Hiccup jumped back, Rose's skin too hot for even him to touch. Steam drifted from her sweat-drenched skin. She looked right at him, but her eyes were no longer hers. They glowed with a fierce need, and a terror struck Hiccup's heart as Rose stared at him.

"Time is running short," she said with an unfamiliar voice. Hiccup staggered back as her eyes began to glow, light wafting from them like smoke, her voices layered like a dragon's.

"Who are you?" Hiccup screamed.

"I am the Valkyrie, and you must hurry. Time!"

The glow faded, and Rose's head fell once more. Her whole body folded over and almost tumbled out of the bed. Stoick and Valka both made a move to catch her, and caught her before her head hit the stone. They lifted her back into the bed, touching her face as it cooled, as the blood from her nose slowly stopped flowing, their shaky voices trying to coax her back.

Rose's eyes snapped open, a scream exploding from her throat. She entered a fit of violent shivers, tiny shallow breaths whistling through her tight lungs and Valka and Stoick held her down, embracing her and rocking her, soothing her.

"It's okay!" Valka said quickly as Stoick rocked her back and forth upon the bed. "We're here!"

"H-H-Hicc-Hiccup!" Rose sobbed hysterically. She closed her eyes and sobbed as air tore in and out of her body. Hiccup found himself and he moved to her slowly, but couldn't shake a feeling that had burrowed itself in the pit of his stomach. Rose pushed herself away from her parents, and she tried to get out of the bed, desperate to reach her brother. "Hiccup!"

Hiccup caught her as she stumbled into his arms. Her legs were weak, trembling. She looked up at him and Hiccup noticed the terror in her eyes.

"She needs to go back to bed!" Juniper said quickly.

"No!" Rose screamed. Everyone silenced as she hung her head again, shaking. "We need to go. Now, we need to go now!"

Hiccup furrowed his brow, trying to keep up. "What?"

Rose shook her head and placed a fist above her ear. "They have Astrid!" she cried. Hiccup's grip tightened on Rose's arms as she repeated it over again. "They have Astrid they have her they have her!"

"What do you mean?" Valka asked, suddenly harsh and hard, her jaw clenching.

"D-Dagur, Astrid bonded Dagur, he's he's he's he threw her away into a cell, he's!"

Hiccup gave her a rough shake, forcing her to look at him as his wild

eyes searched her for any untruths.

"He waited till I left," Valka spat. "Barb."

"What about Barb?" Hiccup asked.

"Dagur's men captured her when she was turned around by a storm, she told Dagur everything. The bond, the Saviour, everything!"

"What did you see?!" Hiccup asked loudly, almost yelling into Rose's face. She grabbed his blood-stained shirt and held him tightly, as if he were holding her over a cliff.

"You never told me," she choked, "you never told me, you should have told me!"

"Told you what?" Hiccup asked desperately.

Rose's lip twisted as she sucked in a sharp breath. She locked eyes with Hiccup and begged him with every part of herself. "You â€“ your baby."

Hiccup clamped his mouth shut and caught his breath. He leered down at Rose, eyes wide and his heart stopped beneath his breast. Everyone stared at Hiccup â€“ Valka and Stoick both paled and Juniper slowly averted her eyes.

"You should have told me," Rose repeated.

Hiccup gave a slight shake of his head, a lump in his throat. But Rose saw the tears well in his eyes as he tried to look away, and Rose tore away from him.

"We have to get Astrid out of there," she stated, her strength and her wits returning to her. "That vision â€“ we won't have another chance if we wait."

"Wait â€“"

"Do you trust me?" she asked Hiccup sharply, a hand on his chest. Hiccup didn't move, a hesitation freezing his legs, his arms. "I know I may have taken moons away from you and herâ€¦ and you have no reason to put any faith in meâ€¦ but I need you to."

Valka and Stoick watched in silence as Hiccup's face hardened, and colour returned to his cheeks. He grabbed Rose's wrist and kissed her firmly on the forehead before stepping around her. He looked at his mother and father and they looked up slowly, sadly.

"I didn't know," Stoick choked, barely making any sound.

"It wasn't meant to be," Hiccup replied quickly, his voice breaking. "Mum, can you fly us back to where they're keeping everyone?"

"Ayeâ€¦" she replied reluctantly.

"And Eret can lead the ships."

"It's a long journey. At least three days' ride by dragon."

"Not our dragons," Stoick countered. "If our son has a purpose, he can break barriers."

"And our water dragons will drag the ships faster than the wind will take them," Rose finished.

"We'd be flying in blindly," Stoick spat. "Val, what are our options."

"There is a single port," she said quickly. "It looks like a sea cave at low tide and it leads into the rest of the compound."

"Only the one?"

"Aye, and we'd only be able to breech it if the snow hasn't plugged it already."

"We'd better move," Rose stammered. "It'll take us until dawn to get the dragons ready, if we wait â€“"

Hiccup was already on the move. He left the room and entered the main hall once more, jumping up the stairs to the throne three at a time. The feast hushed after a few tense moments, and Hiccup took a deep breath.

"There's been a change in plans," he stated strongly, images of Astrid's face dancing behind his eyelids. Everyone looked up at him. Cauli stood and Netmug peered up at him. "Netmug, where is Barb?"

Netmug scoffed and everyone mumbled and groaned quiet complaints. They were worried for a moment.

"She never eats dinner with me," he laughed sardonically.

"Dagur and his men have captured her," Hiccup replied darkly.

Netmug dropped the turkey leg he was eating from and he stood slowly. "Is that a joke?"

"It's no joke," Valka replied to him. "She told Dagur everything about us. I flew here to warn Hiccup but I didn't know she had a husband."

"You're damn right she has a husband!" Netmug yelled. "Where is she?!"

"Probably dead by now, that was three days ago." Valka shook her head and gave a defeated shrug. "He has the upper hand now."

For once, Netmug's face dropped, a twinge of feeling at the edge of his features. Cauli's peeked over, a frown on her lips.

"What do we do?" Snotlout asked. "If he knows everything, then â€“"

"We're flying out," Stoick grunted officially. The hall began to vibrate with nervous prattling and whispers.

"Open the storm doors!" Hiccup ordered. "Everyone brave enough to ride a dragon will do so. Thunderdrums, Cauldrons, and other water dragons will drag the ships over sea. If we leave now, we may be able to make it to Alvin and Dagur before they make it to us. So let's move."

Benches and chairs scraped across the floor as people left the hall in waves. Hiccup watched them leave, but couldn't move himself, as Stoick relayed the plan to the dragon riders, who all ran off in separate directions. Cauli and Netmug both barked orders to the foot soldiers, and soon everyone had somewhere to go. Rose moved to pass him and he grabbed her arm, pulling her to him so no one could hear him speak.

"You said Astrid bonded Dagur?" he asked gruffly.

Rose gave him a terse nod, her body shaken and cold. "She did."

"What about what you told me?" Hiccup continued loudly. "When â€“ when you bonded us, you had to give a part of yourself away, is that true? Didâ€| did Astrid do that?"

Rose furrowed her brow and closed her eyes. "Someoneâ€| jumped in the way. He inadvertently completed the bond andâ€| sacrificed all four of his aspects at once."

Hiccup shook his head, trying to grasp the meaning of her words.
"What does that mean?"

"It means Dagur now possesses four times the strength we do. It means we have to be careful. It'sâ€| why we have to get everyone out of there now."

He nodded slowly, closing his eyes and cursing under his breath. "Go. Get ready."

Hiccup left the hall last, summoning Toothless silently as he left the protection of the hall. He slowed and looked up at the sky, something catching his eye and stopping him in his tracks.

White flakes of snow floated to the ground around her feet, sticking to the ground. And as Snowdrop flopped over to roll around in the fresh white powder, Hiccup felt a flake of snow kiss his cheek and melt into his hot skin.

* * *

><p>Eret and his crew returned to their ship, pulling the sails down and throwing ropes into the water.</p>

"I don't want to help," Mehran whined. "We're all gonna die."

"I'd rather be on this side of things when things get messy," Eret grunted as he tightened a knot around a hitch. He looked up at the dark sky and put his hand on the hilt of his short-sword, reminding himself it was there. Ruffnut approached the boat slowly and caught Eret's eye as he let go of the rope. She motioned for him to come to her, and he jumped back onto the dock quickly. He wanted to say something to her, but Ruffnut made him forget his words. He shut his

mouth and awkwardly squirmed for a split second before Ruffnut said anything.

"Thanks," she said bluntly. "For, you knowâ€| saving me."

Eret's shoulders relaxed and he bit his cheek.

"You don't need to thank me," he replied.

"I know, but still. Thisâ€| is a big deal to me, so yeah."

And she turned on her heel and left, climbing into her Zippleback saddle and looking to her brother before they took off above them, leaving Eret with a smile on his lips.

* * *

><p>As light began to turn the black sky above Berk grey, Hiccup tightened the buckles of his riding gear. He checked the loops attached to his wing suit and cranked his leg over to secure it to Toothless saddle. Hundreds of dragons had been mounted and reined by Berkians and other alliance members too anxious to retrieve their family members. Stoick had sent Thornado, his Thunderdrum, to the ships, where they had been tethered together tightly and sent out a few hours beforehand to get a good start. Rose had found him a Rumblehorn to fly, which Stoick lovingly called Skullcrusher, and they all waited for Hiccup's command.</p>

Everyone was flying into this fight. Women and men all had swords tied to their belts, their children and the elderly locked away safely in the tunnels of the Great Hall with enough food to last them a few weeks. A single ship and captain stayed behind as well on the other side of the island close to the bay Stoick had taken Snowdrop through the night of the battle.

Everything was as complete as they could make it, and everyone took a few shallow breaths as Toothless carried Hiccup towards the edge of the cliff.

After all we've been through, Toothless murmured in his mind. I'm happy you shot me all those years ago.

Hiccup smiled tightly. "Me too, bud. And I'm glad you bit off my leg."

I'll be with you until the end._

Hiccup's eyes stung, and he gave Toothless a scratch behind the fins.

Loveâ€|

"I love you, too bud."

Valka reached up to Stoick on his Rumblehorn, resting her hand over his as he secured himself in his saddle. Hiccup watched his father lean down to kiss his mother, and a sad feeling crept into his stomach. He hated to do this the evening of their reunion. But Valka turned and looked to Hiccup again and gave him a small smile as she mounted Cloudjumper. She led them, jumping off the cliffs and

twirling in the air as Cloudjumper soared up into the clouds. Hundreds of men and women howled and cried out, beating their chests as the dragons beneath them shrieked and roared. Hiccup shot after her, and Rose shot after him. Soon, everyone was in the air, squinting through the snow as it pelted their faces, everyone sending a small prayer to the gods above.

43. The Harbinger

_Hello, everyone! Thank you for the reviews and messages as always!

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* * *

><p>Chapter Forty-Three: The Harbinger

They kept Astrid, Barb, and Stargazer in their cell for days. They gave them no food, no water, and everyday more and more people were dragged down the halls and thrown into other cells. Astrid had barely moved from her mother's lap, her body feeling no better than it had before. Barb stayed silent in the corner.

Astrid hadn't been able to sleep. Too uncomfortable, too sick, too restless as memories of Dagur's body changing in front of her plagued her tortured mind. Did Hiccup even know? She didn't think so; it was easier to give up hope than it was to pray for something impossible.

Finally, a soldier came and opened the cell. The sound the metal made across the floor made all the women cringe before the man stomped in and grabbed Astrid. Stargazer tried to hold onto her, but the guard was stronger, and hoisted Astrid to her feet. Astrid didn't struggle, and two more soldiers entered the cell and grabbed Barb and Stargazer, shoving them after Astrid. Stargazer didn't move, lost and confused and blind, unsure of where to go, and Astrid struggled against the soldier who held her.

"She can't see, let me lead her!" Astrid pleaded. The soldier shoved Astrid roughly and another grabbed Stargazer's arm, pulling her violently.

"Where are you taking us?" Barb asked raggedly, hobbling on one leg the best she could. No one answered, but Astrid already knew. Cheers echoed down the halls ahead, and the smell of blood made Astrid feel ill. She struggled against the soldier, but she was too weak. They passed the gouge marks in the floor made by dragons, and Barb gawked at them she stepped over them. They ascended a flight of stairs as the cheers and roars of hundreds and hundreds of people deafened the prisoners. They stumbled through an archway, which led to the Pit's spectator area. Hundreds of Berserker soldiers screamed and made crude gestures to Astrid and the others as they were pushed through the crowd.

At the edge of the audience, the soldier wrenched Astrid back, stopping her roughly. She looked through the chains of the arena and found Dagur atop of Thorvane. He no longer wore his armour, and remained bare-chested to his men, a sword in the air as Thorvane roared and rumbled. Astrid wriggled within her soldier's grasp, but he grabbed her braid and gave it a sharp pull. She gasped as her head

was wrenched back, and she stopped moving.

She looked over, gritting her teeth, and saw the audience wasn't only full of Berserkers and Outcasts, but Berkians and other alliance members, who all looked around terrified. Everyone Astrid had ever seen in the Underground was around her, either excited for the show they were about to see, or wondering why the hell they were there.

"My brothers!" Dagur screamed, opening his arms to the crowd. It went wild and Astrid bared her teeth, tensing her entire body. He laughed loudly and Thorvane shrieked. He fanned out his massive wings and reared up on his hind legs, chortling and foaming through his iron muzzle. Astrid tried to connect with him, but it was as if he wasn't even in the room. He didn't notice her. He couldn't remember.

"Dagur!" Alvin screamed from across the arena. "What is the meaning of this?!"

"An impromptu show," Dagur replied loudly. "A chance to finally prove the strength of our men, of the possibilities that await them!"

He hushed the crowd with a hand and when the room silenced into a quiet hum, Dagur shuddered through a bout of ecstasy.

"Today marks a momentous occasion," he moaned. "Too long have we been exiled from Berk and her allies. Too long have they tried to maintain peace. We fought them, proved to them the power we possessed when we slaughtered and conquered their pathetic villages!"

Another roar washed through the crowd, and Astrid pulled against her soldier, who laughed in her ear.

"But word has itâ€¦ they haven't taken a very good hint! Still, they try to rebuild their lives, spreading the word of the Saviour around our halls. But that Saviour is no match for us. They cannot best our steel, or my dragons. I have tamed Skrills, Whispering Deaths, dragons their hiccup of a man claimed could not be bested. Behold!"

Thorvane shrieked into the air again and dropped to the ground. Everyone marvelled at it with a horrified fascination, and Barb stared at it with trembling lips and a pale face.

"They think us children, incapable of greatness!" Dagur continued. "But I have found their secrets, and can lead you all on a higher path, a path where man and dragon fuse as one, and total control overcome all."

"Dagur, this is madness!" Alvin yelled.

"I'm not the one who's mad," Dagur growled. Berserkian men stopped Alvin as he tried to near the audience edge.

"I offer our people power," he continued. "I offer them what they'll need to conquer every surrounding island. I offer them protection from the scrutiny of peace-lovers who want nothing more than to see us fade from history! Let's see how peace saves them now, in the horror of the Pit."

The guard slammed a hand into Astrid's back, and she tumbled over the edge. She screamed before she hit the ground, rolling to protect herself, as she landed in the Pit. Stargazer fell next to her and Barb followed, crumpling as her injured knee shattered under her. She screamed and howled and Astrid gritted her teeth as a groan escaped her throat.

* * *

><p>"Come on, bud!" Hiccup cried to Toothless over the wind. "We're almost there, almost there!"<p>

Valka grunted and panted as they made their final stretch, over the ships, nearing the Underground every minute. Every person looked on, the hair on their skin standing on edge as their dragons slowly felt the darkness approach.

* * *

><p>Astrid rolled to her hands and knees, crawling to her mother, who sat up, dazed.<p>

"Stay by me," Astrid told her, wincing and holding her side. "Just stay by me."

"Look how they grovel to protect each other! Look how weak they are without their dragons!"

Barb sobbed and held her leg, cursing and spitting insults towards Dagur, trying to breathe through the pain.

"Where's your Saviour, now?!" Dagur yelled, laughing manically. Alvin struggled against the soldiers restraining him.

"We are supposed to protect these people!" he cried.

"I never agreed to that," Dagur retorted. He threw his hand up and a collection of weapons fell next to them. A shield with a broken handle, a spear, a short-sword, and an axe clattered next to Astrid's feet, and she looked at the axe with sweat beading on her forehead. A huge cell door on the other side of the arena opened slowly, and a violet Nadder ensnared in chains, hungry and rabid, scratched at the ground as it tried to get out, eyeing their flesh.

It wriggled under the gate and sprinted for them. Astrid grabbed Stargazer and leapt out of the way, running across the arena as the Nadder's jaws closed around Barb's screaming head. Astrid stumbled back into the wall as Barb screamed for her, flailing her arms as the Nadder lifted her up. Astrid made no move to help before the Nadder chomped down. Barb's kicking legs went limp and the Nadder threw its head back, swallowing her body in two gulps. The crowd cheered and roared again, and Dagur laughed at her. The Nadder looked up, locking eyes with Astrid.

Run.

It charged after the two women, and Astrid shoved Stargazer out of the way. She fell and covered her head as Astrid jumped and rolled in the other direction. The Nadder careened with the wall, making the

arena rumble. Astrid scrambled to her feet and she ran to the pile of weapons. She grabbed the spear and waved it around her head, screaming and bellowing as the Nadder lifted its head again. It loomed over Stargazer, but when it heard Astrid's cries, it looked over.

It ran after her and Astrid stood her ground, clutching the spear. The Nadder opened its jaws and for a moment, Astrid could see right down its throat. She held the spear up and, holding it sideways, she slammed it into the Nadder's jaw. The Nadder tried to chew down, but the metal stopped it. Astrid's back was crushed into the wall as the Nadder pushed against her harder and harder. The crowd cheered and waited to see if the dragon would close its jaws around her as it had done with Barb.

But Astrid returned to her training, and the sudden familiarity of battle took over her body. Adrenaline filled her veins with fire, and she screamed as she twisted the spear, dislocating the Nadder's jaw. The dragon screeched and flailed back as Astrid fell to her knees, holding her back. Dagur glared and his nose twitched as Astrid looked up. The Nadder cried and cowered, too afraid to fight.

I'm sorry! it cried. It shuddered in the corner and tried to move its wings to its mouth, but the chains held it still. Astrid leered over at Dagur.

"This is not what a man does!" she screamed at him. "Only a coward would do this!"

Dagur wrinkled his nose and he snapped his sneer towards his soldiers at the top of the arena. Astrid looked up and saw the men with the harpoons, the harpoons used for killing dragons if they turned on Dagur. Astrid's heart stopped as they fired it. She whirled her head as the harpoon shot over herself, planting itself through Stargazer's belly. It embedded itself into the wall behind her, and Stargazer's mouth gaped open as she tried to catch a breath. Dagur smirked as Stargazer choked for air, her hands around the harpoon as thick as her arm.

"MUM!" Astrid screamed. She sprinted to her as Dagur laughed again, and the crowd roared. Astrid grabbed her mother's head as it lolled forward. Stargazer's feet dangled over the ground as she gasped for air, trying to say words as blood trickled out of her mouth. Astrid frantically gave her head a shake. Panicking, she grabbed the harpoon and tried to pull it from her mother's body. It came free and Stargazer slumped into Astrid's arms. Sun Sap oozed from the wall behind her, coating the floor and smoking up as it hit the dry stone. Astrid dragged her mum away from the sap, cradling her in her lap desperately. "No, mum!"

But Stargazer reached up to her head as her life faded from herself, and she weakly pulled her bandages away from her eyes. Astrid faltered, tears soaking her face, as Stargazer gazed up at her gently. One eye was so scarred, it couldn't see, but the other looked upon her face. It was distorted, but a tear welled up over her eyelashes as her skin went pale. Astrid felt her mother's hand press itself over Astrid's belly, squeezing it with failing fingers. A smile flickered over Stargazer's lips, the sight of her daughter fixed in her final moments.

"Mum?" Astrid squeaked. "M-Mum? Can you hear me?"

"Youâ€| look likeâ€| your father," she coughed. Her last breath wheezed out of her lungs as blood pooled over Astrid's lap. Astrid tried to say her name over and over again, as if it would wake her up, as she sobbed heartbroken sobs over her mum's lifeless face. Stargazer's hand left Astrid's belly and Astrid screamed in agony as she realized she was gone.

* * *

><p>Astrid's father sat looking at himself in the pond, his legs dangling over the edge of the shore. He hummed a tune to himself, sighing through his nose.</p>

"I thought you hated that song," a voice whispered behind him. Astrid's father stopped humming. He slowly turned, looking up at the woman who had spoken to him. He blinked and stood up nervously, facing the woman."

"Sigourney?" he asked hoarsely. Stargazer, with her eyes returned to a healthy state, beamed at her husband. He grabbed her and held her against him, breathing in her smell as she sighed into his chest.

* * *

><p>Sun Sap oozed its way out of the wall towards Astrid, who snarled and glared up at Dagur. He laughed and opened his arms towards the crowd. Astrid pushed her mother's body off her lap and she made it to her feet, her body shaking and her blood the hottest she had ever felt it. She wanted his head, she wanted to see his body crumple and bleed.</p>

Assstâ€|

Astrid blinked, a distant sound connecting with her jaggedly. A sound she recognized, a voice known to her.

Asssstriiid?

Toothless?

Astrid made a dash for the axe as Dagur continued to laugh. She slid to it on her backside, snatching it up in her itching fingers. She twirled it in her hands, gripping it in her red hands. She trembled in agony, fuelled her steps. Dagur, too enraptured by the adoration of his men, didn't notice her as she stormed to the Nadder. She felt no more pain, no more restraint, as she raised the axe over her head. The Nadder squealed and flinched as Astrid brought the axe down.

Metal connected with metal as Astrid broke the brittle lock securing the Nadder's chains around its body. The rusty lock snapped open and the chains rattled and clanged together. Astrid grabbed one of them and hauled herself onto the Nadder's back as it wriggled free, flapping its wings freely for the first time in years. They were weak, but Astrid felt the Nadder come to, gratitude seeping into Astrid's mind. Astrid held onto one of the Nadder's spikes as it roared and shrieked, popping its jaw back into place with a

wing.

Dagur and Thorvane both spun around and scowled at Astrid, who stood atop the dragon with expert balance. Berkians and alliance members threw their fists in the air.

"Saviour! The Saviour!" they screamed. Berserkians shut them up by grabbing them, and Astrid pointed her axe to Alvin.

"Dagur has been lying to you all!" she sneered, tears and blood still staining her face. "This coward has brought us all into a trap!"

The crowd murmured and hummed as the Nadder danced in place.

"You think he built this place on his own?!" she continued. Alvin and the soldiers holding him all furrowed their brows in thought. Astrid shook her head. "Look around you, brothers and sisters of Berk! Look at the walls, look at how they've been smoothed by dragon scales! Alvin, he's brought us into a dragon's nest!"

"Shut it!" Dagur replied. Thorvane took a step forward, but the Nadder hissed, twitching its head and fanning out its spikes. Thorvane hesitated and Dagur fumed.

"What are you saying, Astrid?!" Alvin asked.

"We need to leave, we need to get out now!"

"Where will we go?" a Berkian woman asked, throwing herself to the arena's edge, staring down at Astrid frantically. "They destroyed our home!"

"If we go now, there are people nearby who can take us to safety!" Astrid replied. Dagur howled and Thorvane screamed.

"You lie!" he screamed.

"Alvin, Hiccup and Birdsong are outside with ships, I saw them!" Astrid cried. "If we don't go, Dagur will kill us all! What Barb told you is all true, Hiccup and I possess magic I can't explain right now, but you have to believe me! Dagur is much more powerful than us, and he wants nothing more than to take your people from you and enslave them!"

"Birdsong turned against me?" Alvin asked hoarsely, baring his teeth.

"No, she's come to get us all out of here, she's the one who found out about this place!"

"ENOUGH!" Dagur screeched. Thorvane bellowed and charged towards Astrid and the Nadder, who both screamed and jumped to the side as Thorvane crashed into the wall behind them. Dagur slashed his sword towards Astrid's face and Astrid fell back, the blade soaring over her face by a hair. The Nadder rushed out of the way as Astrid sat up again, gripping the Nadder spikes as it ran. The Skrill shook his head and gnashed his teeth, running after them again. The Nadder flung its tail back and spikes flew for Thorvane's eyes. The Skrill yelled in pain, but kept running for them. The Nadder ducked under the Skrill's jaw, fanning up its spikes. Astrid swung her axe and

Thorvane screamed as it cut his throat. He reared back and thrashed his head. The wound was shallow, not threatening, and Dagur screamed again.

"GET BACK HERE!" Dagur screamed.

"Everyone, run to the docks! Run for the Saviour, run for the Spirit Weaver! They will take you to your families, just get out!"

People began running, shoving past each other for the hallway leading to the main hall.

"No! I will not let him take this away from me again!" Alvin howled. Dagur sneered at Astrid.

"They'll never get out, not with the snow closing the port. How is the Saviour supposed to find you now?"

Thorvane charged once more, slapping the Nadder in the face with a razor sharp wing. The Nadder screamed and howled as blood burst from its eyes, blinded by Thorvane's strike. The Skrill opened its mouth and closed its jaws around the Nadder's throat. He lifted the Nadder up, crushing it against the wall. Astrid's leg, trapped between beast and stone, hacked at Thorvane's face with her axe. Dagur slashed out with his own sword, knocking Astrid's weapon from her hands.

Thorvane scraped the dying Nadder and Astrid up the wall. Astrid's leg throbbed in pain and Astrid gasped, trying to wriggle free, the bones in her leg bending unnaturally. She twisted her head, trying to bear the pain, as Thorvane shoved Astrid's face next to a torch embedded in the wall. She pursed her lips and looked to her mother's body on the floor.

"Berserkers, man the ships! Prepare for war! Bring me the Night Fury! Cut any deserters down! The Underground is ours, and ours alone!"

"No!" Astrid screamed. Berserkers and Outcasts loyal to Alvin and Dagur all drew their swords, crying out a proud war cry as they ran after the fleeing prisoners.

"Release the Pit dragons, I want them to feast on Berkian flesh!" Alvin cried. "We will not be exiled again! We will protect our home!"

"No, wait, you have to believe me, Alvin!" Astrid screamed. Thorvane shoved Astrid up the wall again, and Astrid cried out as her leg twisted painfully.

"Birdsong brought Hiccup right into my hands," Dagur laughed. "And when I destroy you, he's next, just like your pathetic excuse for a mother."

Astrid grabbed the torch from the wall and stabbed the butt-end of it into Thorvane's eye, screaming as she thrust it deeper and deeper into the dragon's head.

The dragon skittered back, pulling free of the torch. The Nadder hit the ground, and Astrid struggled to her feet. Her leg didn't break,

thank the gods, and she flipped the torch over in her hand. The remainder of the crowd all charged for the docks as Astrid hovered the flame over the hole in the wall made by the harpoon that had killed her mother. The Sun Sap flowed from it like cut skin, and Astrid thrust the flame over the explosive liquid, as the Pit emptied like a jug of water. Berkians and Outcasts alike all rushed to save themselves as the Berserkers ran them down.

Dagur kicked Thorvane with his steel-clad boots and the two of them raced towards Astrid. She looked up him through her hair, a curse on her lips.

"I am the Harbinger," she told him under her breath.

She opened her hand, dropping the torch into the puddle of sap at her feet.

* * *

><p>A bright light erupted in the distance. Hiccup covered his eyes with his forearm as Toothless hissed. Every dragon reared, flapping their wings about to stop themselves from advancing. The ships below all sailed on, but everyone stared forward at the huge blast of light.</p>

I heard her! Toothless cried loudly. I just heard her, a few moments ago!

The sound hit them next, and everyone slapped their hands over their ears. The dragons all shrieked and grimaced, disoriented by the blast. They all remained in the sky, shaken and bewildered.

"Come on!" Valka cried.

* * *

><p>Astrid's feet left the ground as the explosion ricocheted her body into the wall behind her. The air flew out of her as her back smashed into the stone, and heat seared the skin upon her face, and the explosion made her ears bleed. Cracks shattered across the ceiling and blew forth, showering the arena in rubble and letting the light of day in. Debris fell down as the light disappeared, fire licking up the walls as Sun Sap lapped it up from every new crevice created by the deafening blast.</p>

A huge chunk of the roof caved in and smashed through the floor, breaking it apart like eggshells. Astrid fell to her knees as the ground gave way under her feet, and she fell down, down, down, failing her arms about to catch herself. Cold air whisked past her burned face as darkness consumed her.

She landed on a soft, uneven surface and rolled to the side limply, tumbling until her body hit the cold, wet stone. Her stomach and chest hit the ground first, followed by her head. She cracked it painfully, but something kept her awake. Broken, battered, and barely alive, Astrid's legs twitched. She was half-submerged in icy water, her legs and waist completely drenched. She couldn't breathe, but a terrible pain shot through her back like lightning bolts, coursing up her body. Her insides felt scrambled, and gut-wrenching pain sent her body into helpless spasms.

* * *

><p>Stargazer and her husband pulled away from their embrace, a sudden bang shattering any solace within the dreamland. A crack spiderwebbed its way across the floor of the cove, splitting the lake in two. Everyone lurched to the side and tumbled as the lake drained into the open crack. The weaver looked up, her face tense, as she knotted a woven rope between her fingers.<p>

* * *

><p>Hiccup gritted his teeth, fear stopping his heart for a split second. "Come on!" he screamed to everyone as they picked up their pace. It would take them at least a few minutes to get to the island in the distance, and Hiccup couldn't help but think of that as everyone raced for the mountain on fire.<p>

44. The Clash

Here we go, everyone!

* * *

><p>Chapter Forty-Four: The Clash

Astrid cried out, sobbing as her stomach and guts throbbed, grinding against each other in painful bouts of shivers. Her body was riddled with broken bones; tiny cuts made my debris and shrapnel stung against the cold stone. She choked and gasped for breath, slowly returning to herself. She tried to bring her knees to her chest, whimpering and frigid. She shivered and swallowed, trying to calm herself.

She tried to lift her head off the stone, but she could only rock it back and forth. She couldn't feel her frozen legs, she could hardly move. Her teeth clattered together as she growled and grunted. A hand dropped to her side, and she felt the rocks beneath her. Closing her eyes tightly, clenching her jaw to keep herself from screaming, she pushed herself from her side to her back.

Her shoulder rolled and landed on the floor limply. She opened her mouth to gasp and breathe, letting her arm fall at her side. She thought about her feet, how they felt like ghosts to her, and peeled her burned eyes open to the sky above her. Sun Sap poured down the walls around her, pooling on the floor, hissing as the heat killed the dampness beneath it. Smoke flew and twisted out of the Pit and Astrid blinked slowly, her vision slowly returning to her.

She winced if she opened her eyes too wide, the delicate skin around her eyes scorched and raw. Eyes half-hung, blurred blobs of incoherency turned into sharper shapes. The skin around her face began to quiver and close as she noticed the Pit one hundred feet above her, a distant shadow of fire and smoke. Rubble tumbled down, falling towards her for what seemed like minutes before it crashed around her unmoving body. She couldn't hear the rocks smash into the ground, but she could feel it in her back. The blow had erupted her eardrums, protecting her from the loud noises.

Pain blew up her body again, knocking what little air she had in her lungs out of body. She groaned, wrapping herself with a broken arm, unable to breathe.

Astrid?! a voice screamed in the back of her mind._ Can you hear me?!_

Toothless filled her mind, and the pain ebbed away slowly, giving Astrid a window of time for her to breathe again.

I'm here, she thought back to him.

Just hold on, we're coming as fast as we can!

Iâ€| can't feel my legsâ€|

Toothless didn't say anything for a moment, before he returned to her.

Where are you?

I don't knowâ€|

Don't move, we're going to â€"

Wait, Astrid interrupted as she choked for a breath. _You have to save the people. They're trapped. Save them before the fire spreads._

But Astrid â€"

"Hurry!" Astrid coughed out loud.

She groaned again, blood sticking her clumps of her hair together as she lifted her head off the stone. Her face had finally healed, and her arm cramped painfully as the bones slowly met each other once more, fusing together as one. She rolled onto her side again and felt her limp legs twist together, unable to move. She reached over her head to grab a lip in the rock, to pull herself away from the creeping Sun Sap around her. She grunted as she dragged herself feebly, only scraping ahead by inches until she had to stop for another breath. She let her face fall onto the warming stone, gasping for more air as her cheek stuck to the rocks under it.

* * *

><p>Hiccup stared ahead, his eyes wide and his throat tight, as they weaved through the stone pillars blocking them from the Underground miles ahead. He heard Astrid's voice speaking to Toothlessâ€| Astrid's beautiful, familiar voice, struggling to connect as Toothless called out to her. His throat ached as he suppressed his tears, reality sinking into his skin like venom: Astrid was alive, she was on the horizon where smoke billowed high into the sky.<p>

They were nearing the mountain every second, dragons shrieking and calling to the smouldering island ahead. Ships sailed as fast as they could, flying across the water as Thunderdrums and Cauldrons charged ahead. They wove around the pillars, almost smashing into the rocks towering out of the ocean. Eret and his entire crew threw themselves

onto the wheel of his ship, holding it still as their ship turned a harsh corner. The boat creaked and rocked, tipping violently.

"To starboard side!" Eret yelled. Half his men abandoned the wheel and scrambled up the ship's dock, slipping as the ship teetered on its side. They leapt onto the railing, weighing the vessel back into the water.

"The ship's not meant to go this fast!" Mehran squealed. "If your father knew what you were doing with his ship, he'd have your eyes!"

Eret smiled and laughed as he turned the wheel again. "Too bad he doesn't. Hold on!"

The side of the ship careened into a pillar, sending everyone flying into the portside railing. Eret's smile vanished as the ship groaned, timber snapping off the side of it like straw. Eret jumped to his feet and ran to the dragon trap. He threw the gate up, glaring inside for a moment. Water sloshed around within, filling the ship faster and faster. But he didn't focus on that. Instead, he was face to face with a wild dragon, a Timberjack with snarling teeth and a wet face.

"You weren't supposed to hit the rocks!" a tiny voice complained angrily.

The Timberjack jumped out of the trap, grabbing Eret's vest with its teeth. It tossed him up and threw him high in to the air. Eret flailed around before he landed on the dragon's back. He scrambled to sit up, and was met by a drenched, pouting face.

"Snowdrop, what are you doing on my ship?!"

"You really think I'm going to stay behind?! My sister's in there!"

Eret slapped a hand over his face. "Hiccup's gonna kill me."

"Especially if we drown on your stupid boat!"

Snowdrop wrapped the rope reins around her tiny wrists. The back end of the boat broke away, slowly obliterating itself on the water.

"Come on!" Snowdrop cried, waving a hand above her head. Eret's crew all leapt onto the giant dragon, holding onto it for dear life as the deck blew apart under their feet. The Timberjack swung its wing around, slicing the ropes tying the railing and the spar to the water dragons dragging it. It leapt into the air and all the men screamed as the dragon climbed the air, grunting with the extra weight. They hovered over another trading ship, where men jumped down around Cauli, who steered her own ship around the remainder of Eret's boat. She noticed Snowdrop manning the reins and did a double-take.

"What are you doing?!" she yelled.

Snowdrop frowned. "Why does it seem like no one wants me here? I just saved Eret!"

Eret jumped off the dragon's back, rolling as his feet hit the dock.

"Go home to Berk!" he yelled. Snowdrop scowled at him and rolled her eyes. She heaved the Timberjack up and huddled on its back as it shot up into the sky, following formation far behind Hiccup. Eret rubbed his eyes and Cauli cursed.

"How did she get here?" Cauli asked Eret with an unenthused look on her forehead.

"She stowed away in my trap," Eret spat. Cauli raised an eyebrow and snorted.

"You're kidding me, right?"

"She's smarter than she looks!" Eret replied.

* * *

><p>Astrid lifted her head again as Sun Sap poured into the puddle behind her. Her ears were slowly returning back to normal, and the sound of steam hissing into the air made her cringe. She reached ahead and grabbed another lip in the rock. This time, she could get a leg up while the other healed, and she pushed with her knee. She inched forward, grunting as the Sun Sap surrounded her. It slowly illuminated the pit around her as she crawled away from the wall. She reached forward one more time, and her hand hit something raised; a hill, or a protrusion of sorts. She pushed herself up, struggling against her own weight as she dragged her other leg behind her. A cramp caused her to tense up. Grabbing her gut again, she shivered and sucked in a breath.</p>

Something was wrong. Her bones were healing. Her eyes and her ears had healed, her arm and one of her legs was almost back to normal, but something inside her wasn't healing. A ruptured organ, maybe punctured, warm blood seeping around her insides from the impact. Sweat poured down Astrid's face from the heat of the pooling Sun Sap, which had filled the entire floor below her. She kept crawling up, grabbing at what felt like rocks to hoist herself as far up as she could go.

The Sap licked up the hill Astrid was climbing when it became light enough for Astrid to see her hand. Her fingers, pale and bloody and bruised, clutched a rock under her palmâ€œ; a rockâ€œ;

A scale.

Astrid's eyes widened and she forgot about her pain as she noticed the scales under her, creating the hill she was desperately climbing. She let go of the scale and cowered, looking around herself frantically. This was a giant, a dragon she could not see fully. It took a deep breath, raising Astrid into the air suddenly before it sighed. Astrid held onto one of the scales, a huge slab of dragon hide the size of herself, as the dragon hummed.

Hmmmmâ€œ|

Astrid lied upon the dragon's side, her heart cold and pounding

ferociously as she tried to catch her breath.

Soooâ€| warmâ€|

"Oh gods," Astrid wheezed. "Oh gods, oh godsâ€| "

The dragon twitched and hummed again, snorting as it bathed in the Sun Sap. Stargazer's words sang in the back of Astrid's head as she remained frozen, trembling in fear:

Things like Sun Sap only grow on nest sites, to keep the queen warm in the winter. Your father and I explored the Red Death nest after her fall just before I had your sister and it was everywhere within the fortress.

The queen beneath Astrid lurched, struggling against thousands of chains that laced around her body. Astrid gasped and shuddered as it tried to raise its massive head, but the deafening crack and squeal of chains embedded in the floor holding her down forced her still. Astrid could see a crown of what looked like crystals, clear and purple and blue grinding against the wall around her.

What?

It struggled again, this time violently, fear seeping into Astrid's mind. She cried out as the dragon huffed and wriggled, trying to keep her grip secure.

Yoooou tied me here? the dragon asked sadly.

"No, no, I didn't!"

You hear me?

The words were gentle, but ancient. Astrid couldn't help but trust, to calm at the sound of the queen's voice. She whined and made the walls of the pit rumble. Astrid nodded quickly, and the dragon stirred again.

Youâ€| my childrenâ€| talk of youâ€| I've seen youâ€| in my dreamsâ€|

The dazed dragon sighed again.

Who wouldâ€| want to do this to me?

Astrid closed her eyes, holding herself again. "Evil people," she murmured sourly.

This roomâ€| was full of dragonsâ€| before I went for my winter slumberâ€| where are they?

Astrid didn't want to say. The Pit, the Hatch, forced into wars for men, forced to work as slaves â€"

_Your mindâ€| is plagued with dangerous thoughtsâ€| memories of painâ€|
>

The dragon groaned and kicked a leg against the chains, but could not

move. The chains squealed in protest, but there were too many holding her down. She gave up, snorting into the stone.

My childrenâ€|

* * *

><p>"Come on, bud!" Hiccup yelled to Toothless. The Night Fury panted as he surged on like a lightning bolt, following Valka as close as they could. Rose stayed close by with Stoick trailing behind her. They were finally reaching the shore, so close to the snow-covered port that taunted Valka as she approached it. The dragons dove, shooting for the shoreline. Valka held onto Cloudjumper, the fear the speed would tear her from his back repeated itself in her mind. Everyone followed, and Cloudjumper filled his mouth with gas, opened his wide jaws and hissing as they dove.<p>

Cloudjumper breathed his fire onto the huge patch of snow and ice plugging the port, levelling out before they crashed into the shallow waves below. Valka soared out of the way. She twisted around to see her damage, but the ice was too thick.

"COME ON!" Hiccup screamed as they dove. Toothless filled his own mouth, creating a plasma blast in his throat, the wind whistling past Hiccup's ears. He tucked his head behind Toothless' fins, tensing his body, squeezing his eyes shut, his foot itching to crank Toothless' tail.

The plasma blast burst out of Toothless' mouth, slamming into the icy patch with a muffled explosion. Hiccup opened the tail fin and they barely touched the water, twisting and spinning to regain control. Behind him, hundreds of manned and wild dragons fired at the frozen port, diving and levelling out and swarming as the ships entered the bay. The water dragons stopped and sailors hacked the ropes clear from their ships. Water dragons burst from the ocean's surface. Scauldrons heavy with boiling water lumbered to the ice and spewed the blazing salt water onto the steaming ice.

"We're almost through!" Valka told Hiccup.

The ice broke apart and tumbled into the ocean, creating a hole big enough for a ship or two to sail in safely. Hiccup turned Toothless and they shot for it, desperate to get inside.

Suddenly, a cluster of shrieking Whispering Deaths in chains scuttled from the hole, hissing and baring their teeth. They leapt on the Scauldrons, biting into their throats and forcing them back into the water.

Hiccup and Toothless scrambled back, horrified gasps in their throats.

Broken dragons, dragons with shattered minds, attacked the dragons diving towards the port. Hiccup watched in terror as a scarred and emaciated Monstrous Nightmare leapt onto a smaller Gronckle, scratching its face apart as it grabbed the rider between its jaws. It swallowed the rider before the Gronckle threw it off him, squealing and crying as their damaged eyes tried to see.

"Pit dragons!" Valka said, her mouth contorted in horror. "They've

released the Pit dragons!"

"What do we do?!" Stoick asked.

"Strike them down!" Rose reluctantly replied as they watched dragons fall out of the sky like flies. "They have no mind, they have been trained to kill! Keep them off our riders!"

Stoick and Valka shot forward together, aiming straight for the dragons attacking their fellow riders. Cloudjumper grabbed a Whispering Death with his legs and spun around, hurling it into the rocks of the island's surface. Skullcrusher collided with a feral Nadder, scaring it off before the Rumblehorn could inflict more damage. Rose chased after a dragon attacking a Berkian woman while Snotlout and Fishlegs threw a chain around a Typhoomerang trying to spin into the air in a flurry of sparks.

"We've got to get in there," Hiccup growled.

There's too many dragons coming forth, Toothless replied angrily. The pair of them dove, firing another shot at the port's mouth, breaking the rest of the ice apart. They shot up again, grabbing a Zippelback off one of Cauli's men. They hurled it behind them, spinning around to dive again.

HHHHHIIIIIIICCUUUUUUUUUUP!

The voice burst into Hiccup's mind. He screamed and grabbed his head, howling in pain as Toothless reared his head back. The two of them cried out as the sound hissed and grated within themselves. Rose shrieked and slapped her hands over her ears as Stingbreath and the other dragons all cringed and croaked, twisting and tensing in the air as the voice hit them all with a fierce projection.

Cloudjumper thrashed his head back and forth and Valka struggled to keep her balance as he cried out in agony. Stoick found Hiccup in the sky, twisting in pain.

The sound left Hiccup, his strength leaving with the voice for a moment as he fell onto Toothless' back. His ears rang and the side of his head ached, making his eyes roll and his face stretch into a grimace. He pushed himself off Toothless' back, keeping an arm wrapped around Toothless' neck. He gave his head a shake, a shiver crawling up his spine.

"What the fâ€!" Hiccup didn't finish his words as he looked at the chaos below him, hovering hundreds of feet in the air. All the dragons were bucking wildly, trying to compose themselves as riders desperately held onto them.

_I'm getting you out of here! _Toothless yelled.

Hiccup sat up sharply, grabbing the reins. "What?! No, I'm not â€""

Another explosion sent fire belching out of the port, hissing at the bloom of fire stroked the water's surface, searing dragons as they fled from it. Toothless jumped and swerved. Hiccup held him steady as he watched ships sail out, armed to the teeth with bloodthirsty Berserkers and Outcasts. The vessels had cannons firing Sun Sap into

the sky, and with the sky so full of creatures, their shots didn't miss. Dragons spattered in impossibly hot goo tumbled out of the air, slamming into the sea below.

"We've gotta deal with those ships!" Hiccup grunted. He cranked his foot to dive, but Toothless squirmed, trying to disobey. "Toothless, c'mon!"

_No! _Toothless whined, trying to fight Hiccup as he tried to wriggle his foot.

"What is your problem?!"

SSSSSSAAAAAVI000000000000URRRRR!

That voice again, piercing and blinding. Toothless wrenched back and forth, trying to get the voice out of his head.

"Whoa, hold still, hold still!" Hiccup cried, a hand to his head and another reaching for the reins once more. "This isn't gonna work if you won't listen to me!"

You need to listen to ME! Toothless countered, levelling out once more. It's too dangerous!

A bellow shook the port, and Toothless violently flinched. The last of the Underground dragons squirmed and twisted out of the port's mouth as the Berserker ships sailed into the bay. Another roar from within the compound startle the dragons. Rose struggled to hang onto Stingbreath as she wriggled and thrashed, and Valka and Stoick both cried out as their dragons spun and seized up.

A Skrill crawled out of the port, scuttling across the ceiling until it reached daylight. It crawled over the port's lip and buried its talons in the earth above it, pulling itself out like a spider out of an egg. Hiccup grimaced at the sight of its horrendously scarred back, the dips and peaks of them reflecting the sunlight off its violet flesh. Blood had poured out of his left eye and shined under the firelight and sun. Dagur held his sword in a tight fist, his bare back healing from the horrific burns caused by the Pit explosion. His jet black hair clung to his back, his shoulders, his face as he snapped his head to the sky.

He cried out, thrusting his sword into the air, and his soldiers screamed as they advanced.

"A Skrill," Hiccup said in a bout of disbelief. His hand trailed to the scar that bisected his belly, the memory of Crasher slicing him over a year ago haunting his mind.

Dagur, Toothless growled.

"Hiccup," Dagur spat, grinning at him from the ground.
"Finally."

The Skrill launched itself into the air, his wings dragging his massive and injured body into the air. Hiccup grabbed his saddle, cranking his leg. The pair of them banked, twirling and shooting straight for the water. Thorvane followed, jaws open. He tried to

summon lightning, but Dagur had starved him so much in the past, he was unable to muster any. That didn't stop him from tearing after the pair.

Toothless turned and shot over Thorvane. He fired a plasma shot into Thorvane's roaring mouth, just as they had done with the Red Death almost six years before.

Thorvane choked on the blast, biting around it and tumbling out of the air, crashing into the snow below. Dagur flew over Thorvane's head and hit the ground hard, dazing him for a moment. Hiccup looked back to the smouldering mountain ahead.

"Do you hear Astrid?" he asked quickly.

No, there's too much chaos.

The ships below were getting closer and closer, and Berserkers aimed their Sun Sap towards them, firing across the water to the ships.

Hiccup and Toothless flew towards their ships, followed by a dozen allied dragons. A trader ship already ablaze reached up to them. Toothless grabbed Cauli while the allied dragons grabbed the rest.

"I thought you said you'd never fly again!" Hiccup said slyly to Cauli, who looked less than amused.

"I also said I didn't want to die in a fire!" Cauli looked at the waves below her, and looked back up to Hiccup. "Take me and my men to their ships! We'll cut them down!"

Hiccup nodded and soared onward, leading the loaded dragons straight into the fray. They dropped Cauli onto a ship. She cried out bravely, unsheathing her sword before she hit their deck. Dozens of allied fighters swarmed their boat behind her, taking it as their own.

"Take the wheel!" Cauli ordered Netmug as she buried her sword into an Outcast's gut. "Turn the ship around, I want them taken out!"

Alvin ran around the mast, sword raised in the air, screaming a battle-cry as he charged Cauli.

Hiccup flew back up into the air. A Monstrous Nightmare had its claws inside a Timberjack above him. Toothless hissed and they flew into it, knocking it off the Timberjack. Hiccup flew above it, seeing the Timberjack's reins.

"You okay?" he asked quickly.

Snowdrop looked up at him, as if she had been caught stealing from the matrons. Her eyes were wider than Toothless' on a happy day, her mouth in a tiny line. Hiccup spun out and Toothless fanned out his wings, stopping in front of the Timberjack. The dragons both stared at each other, hovering.

"What are you doing out here?!" Hiccup cried, throwing his hand in

the air to unintentionally express his shock.

"Nuffin'," Snowdrop huffed.

Hiccup slapped a hand over his eyes. "You need to go, this is too dangerous for a little girl!"

"I'm not little! I'm five now, ever since it first snowed on Berk!"

"Snowdrop, go home!"

"No! You can't make me!"

"Yes I can, and I am. Take her home," Hiccup told the Timberjack.

"Wait, no!" Snowdrop cried, heartbroken.

"GO!" Hiccup yelled. "I will get Astrid out and bring her home, but I can't have you getting in the way!"

Snowdrop shut her mouth and tears welled up in her eyes. Hiccup's hand fell and regret seeped into his stomach. Snowdrop hiccuped a tiny sob, and she wrenched her dragon around, the pair of them flying away. Hiccup watched them go.

"I shouldn't feel bad," he muttered.

Snowdrop flew away, rubbing her tears away stubbornly with a small fist. Hiccup may have thought she was leaving, but she knew better. There was no way she was leaving, no way. She brought Ruffnut home, she brought them Eret. Today, she would get her sister back. Not even Hup would take that away from her.

* * *

><p>Dagur jumped to his feet, tensing the muscles in his back as the snow melted away into steam. He grabbed his sword from the powder and sheathed it at his side, spinning around to Thorvane, who didn't move. Dagur sneered down at the Skrill's unmoving head, rage building up in his throat.</p>

He reached into his side satchel, almost ripping it in half as he did so. He grabbed a vial of purple liquid, staring into it with relish. He pulled the cork free and pulled his dagger from his boot. He poured the liquid into his sheathe, a smile scaring his ugly face, before he sheathed his dagger, hiding it under his trousers.

His eyes trailed to the Skrill's body, half-expecting the dragon to be dead. But its belly shuddered and the creature gasped a breath. Thorvane opened his good eye, growling through his teeth, spit dribbling from his mouth. A flicker of light danced on his lips, and Dagur smiled. He glared at the Night Fury above as he shot another plasma blast to save his friends from the clutches of other dragons.

"The offspring of lightning and death itself," Dagur chuckled. "Who would have thought?"

Thorvane's body began to glow as streaks of lightning danced across his skin. He groaned and shuddered, mustering himself.

"He gave it back to you," Dagur laughed. "He just gave you your lightning back."

45. The Secret

Lots of excitement after that last chapter. Let's keep it going! (Also, as the chapter suggests, no spoilers in the reviews, just to make people wonder!) :)

* * *

><p>Chapter Forty-Five: The Secret

Astrid could hear the faint echoes of battle outside. Sun Sap blowing from cannons and catapults, screaming dragons, men and women yelling out as they clashed together, in the water and in the sky.

My childrenâ€| are fighting, the queen rumbled.

The queen under her sighed and tugged against her chains to no avail.

Astrid looked up to the nearest chain and tried to crawl to it, but pain stabbed her in the belly. She cried out and curled into a ball.

Do not sacrifice your strength for me, the queen growled. Once the sap has warmed me once more, I will have my full power. These chains will not keep me.

Astrid struggled for air, and she banged her head against the dragon in blind, painful frustration. She gasped again, her vision fading in and out of darkness.

"I shouldn't have done itâ€|" Astrid told herself, tears forming in her eyes as the Sun Sap surrounded her. "I was so fucking stupid, I should have just stabbed him."

You would have died for it, a small, unfamiliar voice gently whispered. If you didn't do it, he would have killed you.

Astrid lifted her head, looking around herself. There were no other dragons around her save for the queen, but this voice was new, young and pure, small and gentle.

Harbinger? Can you hear my voice?

Astrid swallowed, her tongue dry as she stared at the destruction above her, resting her head back down. Her eyes scoped the tall walls surrounding her, trying to place the voice to a dragon nearby.

You cannot see me. Not yet, it told her.

"Who are you?" Astrid asked hoarsely.

I am the Valkyrie.

"A valkyrie? You mean like the stories?" Astrid chuckled, coughing again, a hand on her stiff stomach. "The choosers of life and death?"

The voice giggled, filling Astrid with a strange warm feeling. The pain dissipated for a short moment as the female inside her head filled her mind with sing-song laughter.

Wellâ€| I wouldn't go that farâ€| I'm no creature.

Astrid smiled weakly. "I wouldn't be surprised if you were a valkyrieâ€| if I died now â€""

I am not here to bring you to Valhalla. Quite the contrary. I'm here to get you back on your feet.

Rubble fell around them again, landing on the queen and spewing pebbles up the walls, spattering Sun Sap in every direction.

Comeâ€| it's time you met meâ€|

Darkness clouded Astrid's eyes, dragging her into an envelope of black. Her body felt light as she drifted off. Her eyes relaxed, as if a hand had guided her eyes to shut. She felt herself sink, weightless, as the noise around her quieted.

She awoke in the dreamland a moment later. The sun's rays danced through the branches of the evergreens above her, which lined the cove. The light brushed against her tired eyes and she sucked in a breath through her chapped lips. She forced her eyes open, squinting at the sun above her. How did she get here? Only in deep sleep could she travel to the dreamland, and the notion of her sleeping atop the queen dragon with her body riddled with pain and anguish seemed ridiculous, impossible.

Astrid sat up slowly. She looked around herself, and the first thing she noticed was the cove was entirely deserted. In slumber, she would see the drifting shadows of her loved ones wandering another plane, but here, it was as if she were really in the cove. No figures, no shifting light. She moved her legs and cautiously stood on them, slowly bearing weight down. They felt uninjured, as if she had never hurt them in her life, but her hair was still caked in blood. She pressed her hand against her head, but again, felt no pain.

She stumbled towards the lake, hoping to grab a handful of lake water to wet her dry mouth, but as she turned around to face the water, she realized it had disappeared. The lake was dry, nothing but rotten logs and dead fish and rocks remained. A huge, wide crack in the earth criss-crossed its way across the lake bed.

"The dreamland is broken," the voice said behind her.

Astrid jumped and turned around, twisting to find the source of the voice. Her eyes fell upon a young woman, eyes of green and hair of reddish-brown, with a soft round face. She smiled with a pair of perfect, soft lips. Her cheekbones were sharp, and when she smiled, they created a radiating beauty about her. She had a woven rope tied around her waist for a belt, cinching her white gown at her tiny

waist. They were the same height, and Astrid stared across at her, eyebrows furrowed.

"You're the weaver," she said.

Every time Astrid visited the dreamland, the weaver would be sitting against the wall, weaving a basket, a blanket, a rope but never looked up. Astrid lost her words, trying to piece everything together.

"I am," Valkyrie replied with a soft smile. She sighed and beamed across at Astrid, who looked her up and down, confused. "You seem surprised."

"I saw you!" Astrid breathed in disbelief. "You were there, always weaving."

"When you were here in sleep, and when you left to wake, yes," Valkyrie echoed. "I have always been here, watching you. Watching Rose, watching Hiccup. Weaving."

"But I don't even know you," Astrid said, a hitch in her voice. "Only people I know can come to my dreamland!"

Valkyrie raised her delicate eyebrows, another laugh on her tongue. "If this were your dreamland then you would be right. But this place never manifested around you. Nor did it around Hiccup or Rose."

Astrid pursed her lips and wrapped an arm around herself. "I don't understand."

"I created this place," Valkyrie murmured. Astrid looked up, lips parted. "I created it many moons ago."

"But this is the cove," Astrid retorted, her voice picking up pace and pitch as she became more and more confounded. "This is a place Hiccup and I have been to, we've kept it a secret from most people for six years. How would you know about it?"

Valkyrie looked to the sky and smiled again. She shrugged a shoulder and glided towards the lake bed past Astrid on light feet.

"This is a safe place," she sighed. "A place you could come to, to escape your misery when you and Hiccup became separated. The shadows, the people who come here are just as important to me as they are to you."

Astrid watched Valkyrie in astonishment and bewilderment as she picked up the trailing end of her woven rope, which snaked across the ground all the way to the centre tree, the same tree Astrid had carved her message into. It was tied around a branch within the tree. Valkyrie ran a hand up the rope, looking at the tree.

"You were about to give up," she said, her smile gone. "You were fading, the night you were poisoned. Do you remember?"

Astrid shifted nervously, uncomfortable with the memory of that night. The night she had gained everything, yet lost so much.

"But something stopped you. Something pulled you back."

One of Astrid's hands trailed to her lower back, the faint memory of her being tugged away from Valhalla's gate, the endless sky of stars, fading in and out of her mind. Valkyrie sighed again, dropping the rope at her waist.

"And you want to give up again? When you are so close to freedom?"

Astrid caught her breath, dropping her arm. She flicked her eyes back up to Valkyrie's. She looked away again, guilty.

"The bond with Dagur wasn't supposed to work," Astrid muttered. "Iâ€œ I thought if Thorvane's venom wasn't willing, it would kill him instead, butâ€œ and Mikhaelâ€œ"

"You think you thrusting a knife into his heart would have prevented the onslaught?" Valkyrie asked gently. She didn't expect an answer, but she nodded understandingly. "Maybe. Dagur's men would have leapt on you, destroyed you, and you both would have ceased to remain. But Dagur brought everyone out of their cells to watch you die. And you convinced them to run. If you had killed Dagur, they would be trapped."

Astrid shifted her weight to her other leg, her eyes still down. Valkyrie stepped around her again, slowly drifting across the mossy ground. "This fightâ€œ needs to happen, Astrid."

Astrid looked up again, turning and frowning. "What do you mean? My mother died, she â€œ"

"Sigourney died, yes," Valkyrie interjected, raising a hand. "But she reunited with your father. She helped reveal the Sun Sap to you, which you used to destroy a place of terror and torture. You found the Mother."

"The Mother?" Astrid asked. Valkyrie looked over her shoulder, her face blank.

"The queen of this nest. The queen of all. Do you think she would give up so easily?"

"I'm not giving up," Astrid stated sharply.

"You have." Valkyrie closed the distance between them, refusing to tear away from Astrid's face as she approached. "You would rather die."

Astrid sneered. "What can I do?" she asked shakily, hot tears filling her eyes again. "I created a monster. My body is broken in a pit, on top of a queen where no one can reach me."

"Why would anyone have to reach you?" Valkyrie asked. "Why can't you fight for yourself?"

"I never said I couldn't, I just â€œ" Astrid dug her fists in her eyes, growling, trying to find the right words. "I'mâ€œ not worth it."

Valkyrie gingerly grabbed Astrid's wrists, pulling her hands from her face. Astrid didn't look at her, but her red eyes explained themselves to Valkyrie without the need for words.

"You're worth more than you could imagine," she whispered to Astrid. Astrid huffed shakily, sniffing back her sorrow, her wrists still in Valkyrie's hands. Valkyrie let them go and ran her hand down Astrid's shoulders. She raised a hand and cupped her cheek, lifting her face to face her.

"What can I do?" Astrid repeated hoarsely.

"You have to fight," Valkyrie replied.

Astrid shook her head. "I'm I'm For what?" she asked desperately. "What reason do I have anymore?"

Valkyrie smiled. "For Hiccup?"

She nodded a small nod, biting her lower lip.

"You saw those shadows in the dreamland. All those people, people who are important to you. Past, present, future; all of them, who would have fought for you as you should fight for them."

Astrid pulled away. She wiped a tear from her eye stubbornly as she walked towards the large boulder by the tree, too upset to talk anymore. She felt empty inside, and felt worthless. She stopped, glaring at the boulder in front of her. The same place she took away her own purity, five years ago. Back when she was naive, too defiant of a simple wish.

"I know it's easier to feel hopeless." Valkyrie stared at the back of Astrid's head as she remained fixed on the boulder. "I know it's easier to blame yourself for everything that happened."

"If I fought harder, I wouldn't have been taken. If I was less trusting, I wouldn't have been poisoned. If I was more; stubborn, arrogant, harsh, I wouldn't have taken a knife to myself. I wouldn't have lost my chances at a family."

"If you didn't jump to conclusions so often, you would be surprised."

Astrid blinked. Valkyrie walked around her, facing her once more. Astrid glared at her, tears drying on her cheeks. "What is that supposed to mean?"

Valkyrie shrugged a shoulder, smiling to herself as her long hair blew gently around her face. "I find it interesting you think your actions five years ago still hinder you today. That everything is set in stone, that impossibilities sprout around you like grass."

"Don't," Astrid spat. "Don't ' do not ' lecture me if it has anything to do with that."

"With what? With the child you lost?"

Astrid lashed out, throwing her arms in front of her to shove

Valkyrie away. But Valkyrie vanished, reappearing behind Astrid. Astrid spun around, her face in misery, as Valkyrie stared at her with an unwavering glance.

"Soâ€| there is something you're still willing to fight for," she murmured.

Astrid clenched her hands into fists as Valkyrie smiled across at her. She swung a fist towards Valkyrie's head, but the ground lurched under her. She stumbled and fell, grabbing her gut again, screaming as the cove shuddered and twisted. Valkyrie stared at the sky above her nonchalantly as Astrid struggled for air, squirming as her insides convulsed and ground against each other. The dreamland halted, returning to normal as Astrid fell to the ground exhausted, shuddering gasps whistling through her teeth.

"What â€" is happening â€" to me?!" she choked.

"Nothing your bond can help you with," Valkyrie replied. "That painâ€| is not healable."

"What?" Astrid hissed.

Valkyrie crouched in front of her shaking frame. She placed a finger under Astrid's chin. She lifted her face, and Astrid stared up at her for answers.

"You are my entire world," she whispered lovingly.

"I don't even know you," Astrid whimpered.

Valkyrie sighed, sending echoes throughout the cove as she smiled once more. She pulled Astrid to her feet and held her hands, looking at the blood upon her knuckles, the callouses, the broken fingernails.

"You will," she murmured.

"_It's like the eggsâ€|_" Astrid's eyes filled with tears as her heart skipped a beat, her mother's voice surrounding her once more as if she were still alive. She couldn't look away from Valkyrie as she listened to her mother's words.

"_It's hard to explain, butâ€|_"

Valkyrie reached between them, placing the back of her hand against Astrid's belly.

"_Babies have this very magical way of emerging when they're supposed to. They may be born earlier than usual, or later._"

A tear rolled down Astrid's cheek as Valkyrie smiled at her, her own eyes filling with glassy water.

"_But if it's not safeâ€|_"

Astrid placed one of her own hands over Valkyrie's, squeezing it, pressing it to herself, her breaths uneven.

"I tried," Valkyrie struggled to say without breaking her voice. "The

bond held me towards your back, where no one would see, where I would be safe." She sucked in a breath as Astrid's body began to tremble. Her knees were weak, her jaw open in disbelief, tears pooling and flowing like waterfalls.

"You â€“ you â€“"

Astrid looked at herself, staring at her belly. Valkyrie smiled, flicked a tear away with her finger, and she pulled her hand away from Astrid's belly. She grabbed Astrid's hand and held it to her.

"Ifâ€| you pushâ€| gentlyâ€|"

Valkyrie gently pressed Astrid's hand into herself, watching Astrid's face as she did so.

"Andâ€| if I moveâ€|"

Astrid forgot to breathe as Valkyrie willed her tiny body, hidden within Astrid, tucked under her lower ribs against her spine, to stretch a tiny foot against the wall of her womb. She barely felt it, the leg reaching out to push against Astrid's palm. Her body cramped again, and she gasped, almost falling over. Valkyrie held her upright as Astrid clutched her belly. Her heart raced within her chest, and warmth filled her belly where she thought emptiness reigned. The weeks of backache, nausea, all came rushing back to her as she fell to her knees, curled around herself, a hand over her belly and another covering her face.

"Oh my gods!" Astrid sobbed. "No â€“ this â€“ this can't be â€“ I â€“ I felt â€“"

"I've been here, always," Valkyrie whispered, tears reflecting sunlight off her magical face.

"I thought you were dead, I thought I'd never get to â€“ I can't breathe â€“ oh gods, I thought â€“"

Astrid sobbed loudly, holding herself in pure joy, love and relief and disbelief washing over her as she rocked back and forth. Valkyrie wrapped her arms around her, rocking with her, mother and daughter weeping together under the endless sky above, the wind lightly kissing their wet faces.

Astrid wiped her face with the back of a shaking hand and she pulled away. "Wait â€“ wait â€“ if I â€“ if I can feel you, if you're why I'm in so much pain â€“"

Valkyrie nodded, sighing nervously. "It means I'm on my way. It means you have one chance, one small window before I can't hold on anymore."

She looked up to the tree where she had tied her rope.

"I'll try to hold off for as long as I can," she whispered. "But you don't have much time. I'll try to keep the pain at a minimum, but you have to try. I know you may feel there's no point, but â€“"

Astrid wrapped an arm around Valkyrie, crushing her to her chest. She

pulled away and smiled. "There is a point, now. You are my reason. You always have been."

* * *

><p>Astrid startled awake, her hand lingering over her stomach, her eyes focussing on the fire above. She sat up, cringing against the stiffness in her gut, but she managed to make it to her feet. She swung her arms around as she tried to keep her balance as the queen below her struggled against her chains.</p>

You wake, the dragon said to her.

Astrid gritted her teeth and looked to the opening above her. Sun Sap had surrounded the dragon, warming her frigid hide, and Astrid looked to the chains surrounding the beast, pinning her to the floor. Rubble had fallen all around her, and Astrid snapped her head this way and that, trying to find something " anything " to help. She reached down and grabbed the chain. It hissed as it seared her palms, and she jumped back, screaming. She clamped her mouth shut, hissing in and out through her teeth before she swallowed and regrouped. She wouldn't be able to break those chains with her hands, she knew.

And for some odd reason, she remembered her Dragonling teachings, how to keep an eye out for anything that would be useful in a fight. Hiccup's prosthetic leg at this point would have been useful, she thought sourly, to jimmy the chains until they snapped. But she didn't have that. The chains were growing red hot at the edges, where they disappeared into the Sun Sap around her. She thought for a moment, gulping in a breath as her womb cramped again. But Valkyrie was in the tree in the dreamland, trying to prevent her body from moving too much as Astrid worked.

She looked down at herself and she gazed at her singed shirt. She licked her lips and grabbed her sleeve in a fist. She tore it free after a few sharp tugs. She bit the bitter fabric and tore away with her teeth, fraying the ragged edge. Astrid looked up. No flame fell towards them to ignite the Sun Sap. There was no timber, only stone, and the flames licked up the Sun Sap in the arena.

Astrid crouched and pressed the fabric onto the chain, wincing as the heat scorched through it into her blistered palms.

"C'mon," she growled.

More debris fell from above, and she ducked as another large rock crashed around her. She heard a clang and snapped her head to face it. The short-sword, the weapon thrown to her along with the axe and the spear by Dagur, glinted next to her. She looked away as the fabric began to smoulder, smoke wafting up around Astrid's face. She knelt next to it and blew on it, trying to encourage a little flame, anything, just a glow of orange. The shirt ignited on the hot iron, surrounding Astrid's hands in fire. She didn't care. She looked to the queen under her, sweat dripping down her neck and over her naked arm.

I can't break these chains, the queen growled.

"I can." She tossed the flames over the dragon's edge and ducked, covering her ears and head with one arm and grabbing the short-sword

with the other. She stabbed the sword into the queen between the scales a single second before another bright light and searing heat surrounded her.

* * *

><p>Another explosion startled the soldiers and riders, halting the fight for a moment. Eret watched as the fire billowed into the air, twisting in a cloud of orange and yellow and black. Another boom rocked into them, and Hiccup quickly slapped his arms around Toothless' head to protect his sensitive ears.</p>

Dagur stumbled and regained his balance as his gaze was torn from Thorvane. He stared at the fiery mountain and laughed. Thoughts of Astrid burning in the flames brought him immeasurable joy, and Thorvane chortled and hissed along with him.

But when another tremor rocked the earth, Dagur stopped laughing. Rose flew next to Hiccup, her eyes wide as the island began to shiver and shake back and forth. A deafening roar tore through everyone, leaving them terrified and frozen. The entire battle went silent as another shriek bellowed from the mouth of the mountain. Alvin stood next to Cauli, both of them staring up at the mountain, paralyzed in fear.

The side of the mountain burst forth, sending huge chunks of rock, ice, and tree soaring in every direction.

"Look out!" Rose cried. They dove and banked left and right to avoid the rubble as it soared past them.

WHO DARES TRESPASS ON MY SACRED GROUND?!_

The queen reached up with a glittering wing, a wing covered in precious jewels and metals and dripping Sun Sap. She stretched it high into the sky. When Hiccup had aggravated the Red Death, trying to urge her to fly after him, he thought it was the largest wing to have ever existed. But this wing made the Red Death look like a Terrible Terror in comparison. The wing fanned out, revealing thousands of glittering jewels, as it covered the entire horizon. Rose didn't dare blink, another memory in the back of her mind:

"_She used to be the messenger between Valhalla and our world, the only one who could travel the rainbow bridge. She was the only one who could fly there with her massive wings made of precious stones and silks and godly goods that every man craved. They say that at night, you could see the jewels of the webbing of her wings._"

The entire battle became shrouded in shadow before the wing crashed down into the field next to the Underground. A claw the size of the Great Hall dug deep into the icy earth, and the dragon pulled against it to free herself from the stone concealing her.

Valka and Stoick watched in horror as the gigantic beast pulled herself from the ground. Ruffnut and Tuffnut reached for each other as they watched her scaly, sparkling head smash the stone around her like bread crumbs. Teeth the size of Berkian beacons drenched in drool were framed in trembling lips, a crown of crystal spikes protruding from her inconceivably massive head. They reflected the

sunlight as she roared again, thrashing her head about to free her body.

"I thought that was a myth," Hiccup breathed to Rose. "Maybe that's justâ€¦ a really, really big queen. Or a â€" a king?"

"And where do you think those kings and queens come from?" Rose stammered.

That's the Mother Dragon, Toothless said nervously. _And I think she's upset._

46. The Defiler

_Hello, lovelies! What a doozy of a last chappie! I'd just like to remind all of you to please please pretty please _**_do not expose Valkyrie's identity in the reviews_. ** I love getting reviews, I read all of them the second I get them and they all make me happier beyond belief. I just know there are some sneaky readers that read ahead in the reviews to see what happens (because I have a nasty habit of nasty cliffhangers). But after keeping all of you amazing supporters waiting for so long, it's only fair that newcomers have to wait, too. :) _

_If you already posted a review about Valkyrie, if FF allows it, feel free to **edit it or remove it** if you would be so kind. Again, this isn't because I'm mad or anything! It's just to keep the secret safe!

—

* * *

><p>Chapter Forty-Six: The Defiler

Astrid gasped for air as the Mother Dragon beneath her scaled the pit, crawling into openness. Past the smoke and into the fresh, frigid air of day for the first time in what felt like forever, Astrid gulped in another breath. She gripped the short-sword desperately, dangling under the protection of the Mother's wing as she climbed out of the Underground and into the field next to it.

Alvin stared up at it in wonder, his eyes practically bulging out of his head. Cauli gawked at it, too. Blood covered her cheek under a gash, made by the tip of Alvin's sword just a moment before, but everyone was frozen in place as the Mother's crystal crown, followed by her crystal spine spikes fanned into the sky, filling the horizon with jagged edges and glittering lights.

"Do â€" do we deal with that?" Cauli asked quickly, genuinely. Alvin furrowed his brow, staring up at it.

"Iâ€¦ I don't know â€" I meanâ€¦ wait!"

He returned to himself, raising his sword to strike Cauli down as she remained mesmerized by the beast ahead.

"Alvin, stop!"

Alvin stopped his blade midair, his eyes flicking up to the voice.

Cloudjumper swooped down and landed between him and Cauli, shoving him back with his feet. Cloudjumper fanned out his crown, his eyes in slits, his head twitching as Alvin scrambled back. Valka jumped down, holding her hands out to him. Her arm was bleeding and her face was pale. She took a shaky breath as Alvin crawled to his feet, scowling.

"You â€“ you betrayed me!" he yelled.

Valka pursed her lips and took a deep breath. "You tried to kill my children."

"You gave me your word!"

"You tried to _kill my children!_" Valka screamed. Alvin sneered and raised his sword again, but Cloudjumper shrieked. He cringed and faltered as Valka rushed him, pulling her spear from her back â€“ from a sheathe Hiccup had given her â€“ and smacked his wrist. He dropped his sword and Valka thrust the iron tip of her weapon under his chin.

"You're gonna kill me now, is that it?" Alvin laughed.

"As much as I'd like to, no," Valka spat. "I'm here to ask for your help."

Alvin laughed even harder. "Really? You have the gall to ask for that?!"

"I do," she replied sternly. "After what you put me through, I think it's a decent thing you could do for me, all things considered."

"And why should I help, huh? You'd just sick Stoick on me. Or Hiccup. Or someone, to finish your job."

"Don't flatter yourself, if I wanted you dead, I would have set you on fire by now," Valka said bluntly, her tongue flicking like a snake as she spoke her words. "You protected me for fourteen â€“ fifteen â€“ years of my life and for that, I don't think I can really get away with killing you, no matter how much I feel it will make me happy."

Alvin glared. "What do you want, then?"

"You see that dragon up there?" Valka asked.

Cauli scoffed, almost dropping her sword in sheer arrogance. Alvin dropped his expression, his twisted, grumpy mouth curling into another scowl.

"You mean the big one that just destroyed my island? Yeah, I think so."

"It's not your island, it's hers," Valka replied, swallowing nervously, still holding her spear under Alvin's jaw. "And I think it would be wise for us to leave."

"Well, your dragon is blocking my way, so â€“"

Cloudjumper hissed again, and Valka glared. "Where are the prisoners? Still in the compound?"

Alvin faltered, blinking as he thought about the answer. "They tried to rush the docks, but we closed the gate."

Valka hissed, thrusting the spear against Alvin's skin. "What?"

"I thought they'd get in the way!"

"You selfish, no good" Valka swung her spear around and cracked Alvin upside the head. He staggered over, shaking his head. "They'll burn in there!"

"So what?!" Alvin slurred.

Valka's jaw dropped. "They are your people!" she gasped. "After all these years, does that mean nothing to you?!"

"They all flocked to run to Hiccup!"

"They all ran to escape their deaths!" Cauli screamed.

Suddenly, a flash of white light, unlike the explosion, hit the metal tip of Valka's spear. It blew apart and threw shrapnel in her face. She cried out and fell back into Cloudjumper, holding her face, which bled through her fingers.

"Birdsong!" Alvin cried.

"Sorry to break up the reunion," Dagur cackled above them as Alvin knelt next to Valka. Alvin glared up as Thorvane's wings erupted into lightning bolts. He flew away, laughing as Alvin tried to pull Valka's hand from her eyes.

"Birdsong?"

"I'm alright, I'm alright," she said shakily. She pulled her hand away, revealing a flowing gash on her forehead. Cauli knelt next to her, and Alvin's and Cauli's fighters alike were lost as to what to do.

"Damn that Dagur," Alvin growled as Cauli pressed a dressing to Valka's forehead, wrapping around it tightly.

"He's going after Hiccup," she struggled to say, trying to get up.

"He'll be fine," Alvin muttered. Valka shoved his arm away, scowling.

"You don't get it! Dagur has never been on your side! This isn't about you and him anymore" if you didn't take his wife, this wouldn't have happened."

"I gave us Outcasts a chance"

"By killing innocent people who stopped pursuing you years ago?" Valka asked sadly. "You may have found solace by ruling over a bunch of hostages, but Dagur? He kept killing and killing and killing and

you refused to do anything about it!"

"He gave us the Underground."

"And look what came with it!" Valka yelled, throwing a hand up to the lumbering Mother Dragon. "Now all those people you paid to feed and clothe and protect are going to die because of his selfishness, his trickery."

She stumbled to her feet and jumped back onto Cloudjumper's back. "We have to get those people out of there, before the roof caves in. And I know how much you don't want to, but I know there is a soft-side to you. And I know you hold a strange notion of honour. Redeem yourself. Or I will not stop Stoick from ripping your head clean from your body."

Cloudjumper jumped into the air again, flying straight into the port. Cauli glared at Alvin, who watched Valka go, his eyes following her.

Hiccup and Rose barely caught Cloudjumper's tail disappear into the port. They dove, rushing to follow her. A scream infiltrated their minds, throwing them off-course as they cringed and cried out.

"Hiccup!" Rose screamed.

Hiccup looked up just in time to avoid Thorvane's razor-sharp talon as it swiped for his neck. Toothless spun and Hiccup threw his head back to avoid the claw. They soared into the air, climbing as high as they could as Hiccup looked down over his shoulder. His eyes widened as Thorvane chased after him, his mouth full of lightning bolts.

"He's alive?!" he cried.

I guess that trick doesn't work on Skrills, Toothless grunted. Hiccup looked to the Mother Dragon, who pulled her tail from the Underground's remains, a tail covered in gems and more crystal spikes. She looked to be bigger than Berk itself, and she towered higher than any peak Hiccup had dared scale. They swerved and flew towards her. Hiccup looked behind him again, horrified to see Thorvane twisting around to follow them.

The Mother reared her head, staring at Hiccup with large, extraordinary eyes.

Saviourâ€| Defilerâ€|

"I really hope that's not another name for me," Hiccup mentioned as they flew straight towards her.

It's Dagur's dragon name, Toothless replied.

"Fitting."

The Mother roared again, opening her gigantic mouth and shaking Hiccup's bones. She fanned out her wings and covered the horizon again as Toothless and Hiccup flew into her crown of spikes, weaving through them in an attempt to find cover. Dagur glared and the Skrill

shot lightning towards her eyes. She shook her head, roaring again.

"Why doesn't she roast him?" Hiccup asked, frustrated.

I cannot harm my children, _the Mother replied sourly._ It's not the dragon I want to kill, it's the man who poisoned him._

"Poison?" Dagur asked as he tore after Hiccup, darting over the Mother's head. "I think the word you're looking for is 'tame'."

Fool!

The Mother tried to follow Dagur, but her body was too big, too cumbersome. It was not meant for killing, nor fast movements. Her wings, as massive as they were, could not lift her body into the air. She was nothing more than a rock, but provided Hiccup with enough cover to try to lose Dagur. Ducking under crystals and spikes of minerals and metal, Toothless and Hiccup flew down the length of the Mother. Lightning hit the Mother's spikes instead of Toothless' tail, and Dagur grew exceedingly frustrated with him.

"We have to separate them," Hiccup grunted as they dove under the Mother's belly.

He didn't notice Astrid as he flew past her, and she didn't notice him. Her eyes were closed tight, her ears once again ruptured from the second explosion, her entire body covered in horrific burns. She struggled to keep her feet planted on the scale below her. Her hand slipped from the hilt, but she managed to keep her fingers around it. She peeled open her eyes and looked over her shoulder. She saw the Mother's wing across from her, a row of crystal protrusions just out of reach. She gritted her teeth, trying to control her breath, her belly cramping again.

She swung her feet up and planted them under her. She grunted and pushed back, freeing the sword from the Mother's side, as she leapt for one of the spikes. She landed on her chest and felt the air fly out of her lungs.

The dreamland rumbled and Valkyrie held onto the tree, trying to concentrate on keeping her physical body still.

The sword fell from Astrid's grasp and she scrambled to hold onto the crystal with her burned arms, pain making her cough and wheeze. She swung her leg up and over the spike, hoisting herself up. She coughed again and gasped, holding onto the wing spike as the wing unfurled and furled again. She shivered as she wrapped her legs and arms around the spike. Her skin began to close again, but another contraction knocked the air out of her. Clutching her belly, she cursed and tried to breathe through it.

Valkyrie watched a wall of the cove cave in and gritted her teeth.

The pain lulled and Astrid pushed herself up. Her clothes had almost burned right through. Her shirt hung off her by singed strings. She tore it off herself and dropped it, leaving her in nothing but her loose pants and a couple rolls of fabric around her breasts. She

didn't care, she was grateful to have her arms free as she scaled the wing, trying to climb to the Mother's body.

Leaping from spike to spike, cutting her feet on the sharp edges of the Mother's semi-precious stone hide, Astrid pushed herself forward. She slipped and stumbled on the flat edge of a clear quartz, her bloody feet making things difficult. She threw her arms out, trying to rebalance herself as she looked down to the ground below her. She couldn't help but feel the vertigo as she swayed back and forth. But she closed her eyes and looked forward, running again.

She jumped off the quartz and flailed her arms about. She landed on a cluster and rolled, tumbling onto her side. The stones scraped and battered her, but she endured, still running for the body of the dragon. She was getting closer and closer, almost at the shoulder. She couldn't help but think of how it would be easier if the Mother's wing wasn't the length of Berk, but Astrid gritted her teeth, held a hand over her stomach, and raced forth.

* * *

><p>Valka and Cloudjumper landed outside the gates keeping the prisoners in " a sick idea imposed by Alvin in case there was a revolt. She jumped off the Stormcutter and ran to the gates. Prisoners held out their arms, screaming and crying to her as they pressed their weight against the structure. When people recognized her for Birdsong, some scowled at first. But she ran to the wheel controlling the gears and pulled against it, trying to lift the gate up. She struggled, and the wheel refused to budge. She let go and tried pushing it.</p>

"The fire, it's spreading up the hall!" someone shrieked. Everyone began screaming, banging the iron gate as Valka tried to throw her weight into the wheel, growling and grunting.

"Move!"

Alvin shoved Valka to the side. He gave her a look, a look of regret and reluctance, but he gripped one half of the wheel with his scarred hands. Valka gave him a small, grateful smile and she grabbed the other side. The wheel lurched and scraped against the gears, and the gate lifted from the ground. They cranked it over until people could scramble under it.

"I'll hold it open," Alvin grunted. "Get them on my ships."

Valka swallowed and nodded, a smile still on her lips. "Thank you."

"Stop wastin' time, go before the Berserkers blow the port down around us," Alvin muttered. Valka hesitated for a moment, but she left, running back to the docks with the crowd, looking over her shoulder once as Alvin looked after her, his throat tight.

* * *

><p>Toothless and Hiccup spun under the Mother's wing as Toothless filled his mouth with another plasma shot. They looked back and forth for Dagur, wondering where he flew to, wondering where he was.</p>

Suddenly, Dagur was above them, and he leapt from the Skrill on top of Hiccup. Hiccup screamed as the pair of them fell over Toothless' back. His leg, locked into place at Toothless' side, tore from the rest of Hiccup's body as Dagur threw him onto the back of the Mother. Toothless spun out of control, landing among a cluster of tall spikes out of sight, and out of reach.

The two men rolled until Dagur was on top of Hiccup. He punched Hiccup across the jaw and grabbed his throat. Hiccup grabbed Dagur's hands, trying to pull them away from his throat as Dagur lifted him.

"It's just you and me," Dagur laughed as he slammed Hiccup's head back into the Mother's rock-hard hide. Hiccup coughed and choked as he tried to push Dagur away, his face turning a scary shade of red as Dagur squeezed the life out of him. He squeezed his eyes shut as spittle coughed from his lips, and he reached down to his leg. He grabbed his sword — the retractable sword Gobber had made fun of him for building — and pressed the spring button. The sword's blade sprung forth, burying itself into Dagur's side. Dagur let go of Hiccup, howling. Hiccup pulled the sword free and rolled to the side, gasping for breath.

Dagur held his side, shivering as the wound closed over as fast as Hiccup had made it. Hiccup slid back on his backside, holding his sword between himself and Dagur. Dagur laughed at him. "You really think that little thing is gonna stop me?"

Hiccup clenched his jaw and pressed another button. A spark ignited the Monstrous Nightmare saliva coating the blade along with Dagur's blood. It burst into flame and Dagur raised his eyebrows. He scoffed, letting his hand fall to his side. The wound was gone, leaving behind nothing but the remaining blood that had trickled down his side and into the waistline of his pants.

"Cute knife," he laughed.

"Dagur, I don't want to fight," Hiccup rasped quickly, pushing himself back with his good foot as he held his sword up.

"Then this will be a lot easier."

Just hold on, I'm coming, Toothless told Hiccup in his mind. Dagur laughed again.

"I can hear your pet, too," Dagur noted. "He's too far away, he won't get to you before I do."

Hiccup looked down to his leg, to the stump where his prosthetic should have been. He heard Toothless scream as he tried to run to him, trying to navigate around the spikes. He looked back up as Dagur kicked the sword out of the way. He grabbed Hiccup by his riding suit and hoisted him up over his head. He threw Hiccup into a thick boulder. Hiccup ribs snapped like twigs, but he rolled over onto his hands and knees, trying to get up, his sword skittering away from his hands.

Dagur threw his foot back and kicked Hiccup in the stomach.

"This is so much fun," Dagur growled happily as Hiccup slumped into the ground. He held himself, wincing and trying to muster his strength. Dagur kicked him again, this time in the cheek. His head snapped back and his body crumpled again, stars dancing in Hiccup's eyes.

HICCUP! Toothless screamed. _DON'T YOU FUCKING TOUCH HIM!_

Dagur laughed again. "You taught your dragon how to swear?" he asked Hiccup. He picked him up again and shoved his back into the boulder. Hiccup's head swayed back and forth.

HICCUP!

"He won't make it in time," Dagur chuckled as he drew his sword. "Poor, poor little Night Fury, trying to scramble to his little Hiccup. It's almost as sad as your wife."

Dagur kneed Hiccup in the gut. Hiccup doubled over and Dagur pushed him back up, grabbing his throat again, pushing him up the side of his boulder with the one hand.

"You should have seen her," Dagur growled as Hiccup opened one of his eyes, grimacing. "How her body exploded into a thousand pieces when she blew up the Underground. Thinking she'd be the hero of the day."

Hiccup's eyes fluttered as blood dripped from his cheek down his clenched jaw. He tried to breathe but Dagur squeezed harder, grinning slyly as he pulled his sword back, ready to impale Hiccup's head with his blade.

HICCUP! NO!

Dagur thrust his hand forward, about to shove the weapon into Hiccup's mouth, before something crashed into him.

"GET OFF HIM!" Astrid shrieked. Hiccup's fire-sword in hand, she slammed the blade straight through Dagur, shoving him back by the impact. Hiccup slumped to the ground, face-down, collapsing among the stones. Dagur gasped and staggered back. The blade was buried in his stomach and Astrid shoved it up and down, side to side, screaming over and over again. Dagur dropped his sword as Astrid shoved him back, his face contorted into agony and disbelief.

"You â€“ you â€“" Dagur choked and blood spattered through his teeth.
"You burned!"

Astrid twisted the blade, holding it inside Dagur so he couldn't heal.

"Three moons ago, and today," she spat.

Dagur smiled. "I'll just heal. No matter what you do."

"We'll see how you do after you break every bone in your fucking body."

She let go of the sword and kicked him back. He stumbled, tripping over the uneven surface and tumbling over the edge. He screamed as he

fell down, down, and down, eventually hitting the rocks below with a sickening crunch.

Astrid stared at the sky in front of her for a moment, trying to catch her breath. Her womb ached again, and she winced, her knees shaking. She gasped and spun around, stumbling for Hiccup's motionless body.

She fell to her knees, cutting them on the stone, and she crawled the final distance to him. Fear ensnared her heart as she hovered a hand over Hiccup's back. Her fingers trembled and tears filled her eyes.

"Hiccup?" she asked in a tiny voice. Was she too late? She choked back a whistling breath as she reached across him, grabbing his shoulder and hauling him over. She struggled to pull his limp body onto her lap. She wriggled her arm under Hiccup's head and the other one grabbed his hand. She rocked him back and forth, tears dripping off her face and onto his. "Hiccup? Noâ€¦ no, pleaseâ€¦"

She shook his head with her arm, hoping to see any trace of life. She was finally holding him, and he wasn't moving. Astrid lifted him up, grunting and crying out as she did so, pulling his face to hers. She pressed her cheek to Hiccup's, squeezing her eyes shut. "Don't do this to me!" she wept. "Come on, please don't do this!"

She shook Hiccup's head again, brushing back his hair with a burned and blood-covered hand. "You can't â€" I need you!" she sobbed, rocking back and forth. "Wake up! Hiccup!"

Toothless bounded around the boulder and froze. He stared down at Hiccup's pale body with wide eyes. He tried to connect with him, tried to find his mind, something to latch onto. But there was nothing. Astrid looked up at the Night Fury and a sob tore out of her. She let her head fall into Hiccup's chest as she cried heart-wrenching tears, saying his name over and over again.

A Changewing landed next to Toothless, and Rose jumped from her back, racing for Hiccup and Astrid. When she noticed Hiccup's body as Astrid screamed out in anguish, she froze, too. She caught her breath, staggering to a halt, her green eyes wild and her cheeks draining of any colour.

"Hiccup, please â€"" she choked again. She lifted her face and pressed her forehead against his, swallowing loudly. "Remember our wedding?" she asked shakily through her sobs. "Re-remember? 'You are the wonder of my world.' You still are, you can't leave yet â€" we â€" we're having â€" Hiccup â€""

She sobbed again and grabbed Hiccup's hand. She pressed it against her belly, spreading her fingers over her quivering flesh. "We-we're gonna have a baby."

Holding his hand to her, sobbing uncontrollably, with Toothless looking down at her, Astrid felt her hope drain from her soul. Rose covered her mouth with both hands and fell to her knees, a tiny hiccup flying through her fingers. She was too late.

Astrid kissed his mouth, squeezing his hand so hard she thought she would break it. She kissed him once, twice, and once more, praying

that it would bring him back, knowing it wouldn't. Her shoulders sank. She held his hand against her even harder, convulsing as she cried.

His fingers twitched against her belly. Astrid shot her head up, staring down at him with eyes bigger than the Mother's as Hiccup's fingers dug into Astrid's skin. Hiccup's eyes fluttered as the gash in his cheek closed slowly under Astrid's thumb.

"Hiccup?!" she asked loudly. Toothless crouched down, feeling Hiccup come to. Rose gasped and crawled to him, helping Astrid hold his head up. "Can you hear me?"

Hiccup could hear a voice calling to him, but he couldn't open his eyes. His insides wriggled around as they healed to normalcy, a groan escaping his lips. His ribs crackled as they popped back into place and air returned to his damaged throat. He coughed again, rough and loud, and he felt someone give him a small shake. He opened his eyes slowly, blinking again and again, sucking in another breath as his organs moved and sewed themselves back together, his back arching off Astrid's lap for a moment. He looked up to a shadow above him, a shadow that repeated itself over and over again, calling his name desperately. The shadow began to sharpen, and Hiccup stared up into a pair of beautiful blue eyes, familiar and lovely.

Astrid rested her head against his forehead as he stared up at her, gasping for air, his body sinking back down. Rose covered her mouth again, relief filling her like water.

"A-Astrid Â€""

"I'm here," Astrid wept. His voice, his wonderfully strange voice, caressed her fragile ears.

He reached up and hovered his hand by her face before touching her cheek with his fingertips. Wiping a tear with his calloused thumb, his own eyes watered. A tear fell from the outer corner of his eye and streamed over his temple towards his ear.

"You're here," Hiccup murmured, looking back and forth between Astrid's eyes.

Astrid smiled and sniffed, holding Hiccup's hand against her face. Astrid didn't dare take her eyes from his as a smile stretched over his pale lips. A sob and a sigh flew out of his lungs. He tangled his fingers in her hair and pulled her to him, kissing her as hard as he could. Their faces fit together perfectly, even though Astrid's face was thinner and Hiccup's was rougher. She kissed him back passionately, the taste of his lips Â€" his real lips Â€" sending her into another bout of blubbing. Rose smiled under her fingers, watching the two of them embrace.

They were together. After all this time, they were finally together, sobbing among a forest of crystals and gems and glittering metals, holding each other tightly, refusing to let go.

Astrid kissed Hiccup again and again, repeating his name as she kissed his mouth, his bloody cheek, his eyes, his forehead. He was alive, he was breathing, they were together, holding each other as tight as they could. Dragons all flocked for the Mother's crown of spikes, abandoning the battle as she beckoned them, promising them safety.

"You're so beautiful," Hiccup sighed shakily, snuffing back his tears, holding Astrid's bruised and bloody body against him. "I thought I'd never see you again."

Astrid smiled and a laugh escaped her lips. Suddenly, her belly cramped again. She gasped and pulled away, pressing a palm against herself. Hiccup sat up quickly and turned over, worry striking his face. Astrid pressed her back into the boulder behind her, squirming as she folded over herself. Rose dropped her hands from her face as Hiccup put a hand over Astrid's.

"What's wrong?" he asked as Astrid gritted her teeth and groaned. She grabbed his wrist and placed his hand under hers, pushing his palm into the stiffness of her gut. She shuddered and choked as Rose rushed to her other side, pulling her arm over her shoulders.

"We've got to get her out of here," she breathed quickly.

"Are you hurt?" Hiccup asked Astrid. "Did you rupture something, or?"

"Valkyrie," Astrid wheezed. "She's trying to hold on but gah!"

That name again furrowed his brows and stared at Astrid as she tried to catch a breath. But when he felt Astrid's belly cramp up under his hand, and felt Valkyrie push his hand away with her leg, making Astrid cry out again, he blinked and caught his breath. "What was that?"

Rose pulled Astrid up, and Hiccup grabbed Astrid's other arm. She staggered on shaky legs, swaying back and forth.

"I'm okay," she tried to say.

"No, we've got to get you to one of the healers," Rose countered sternly. "They're just on the next island over, they can."

"Why does she need a healer? Her bond?"

"Her bond won't help her," Rose interrupted, pulling Astrid towards Stingbreath.

"What, why?" Hiccup asked, stopping.

"Because I'm not hurt," Astrid breathed. She looked up at Hiccup as she doubled over, her eyes fixed on his as he stared at her, dumbfounded. "I'm in labour."

Hiccup blinked again, his lips parted and his eyes searching Astrid for further explanation. He looked to Astrid's belly again, shaking

his head as he noticed how flat she was. Astrid grunted. "Our baby," she repeated.

"Our babyâ€| didn't make it," Hiccup replied hoarsely, looking away as his thoughts drifted from himself. "You â€" you told meâ€| you couldn't feel it anymore."

"I couldn't â€"" Astrid replied. She pulled her hand from Rose's shoulders and grabbed Hiccup's face again, turning his head back to her. "She hid â€" the bond hid her â€" to protect her, but â€""

She gasped again, grabbing Hiccup's hand once more. "Can't you feel her?" she whimpered.

Hiccup's fingers dug into her belly, his eyes wide and dry, his breaths shallow and inconsistent.

"Did you do anything to rupture your water?" Rose asked quickly, motioning to Astrid's pants, which were still damp from when she landed in the puddle next to the Mother. Astrid swallowed as she twisted her mouth. Her eyes trailed over Hiccup's head, up to the smoke snaking its way into the air.

"Well," she said with a pained smirk, "I blew up the Underground."

"You're having a baby?"

Hiccup found himself and another tear spilled over.

"_Our_ baby?"

"The same one you thought you lost," Rose answered. "We have to move â€" we can catch up after we get you two to safety. We don't know if â€""

A scream shattered Hiccup's smile. Everyone cowered and looked above them as Thorvane circled above them like a vulture. Dagur laughed down at them, howling passionately, as the Skrill hovered above him.

"No â€" I â€" I killed him!" Astrid cried.

The sword was still embedded in Dagur's belly, but his flesh and organs fused around it. The hilt and tip of the blade protruded out of either side, the blood upon them not even dry. His shattered bones had already snapped back together and fused, all four of his aspects working to instantly heal his broken body.

The Changewing spat acid into the air, hitting Thorvane's leg as Rose pushed Astrid into the saddle. Thorvane shot a bolt of lightning at the Changewing, but Stingbreath jumped out of the way as Rose wrenched her reins over. They soared behind the Mother, protected and out of sight. The lightning hit the Mother and Toothless jumped off her, fanning his wings to keep himself clear of the attack. He landed as Thorvane growled and sneered, and Dagur stopped laughing.

Toothless bounded over to Hiccup and threw his head between his legs, throwing Hiccup into his saddle. Hiccup threw himself back into his

rider mentality, shoving his severed leg into the prosthetic cup. He unbuckled the belts, which were too taught for him to slip his leg into, as Toothless sprinted off the Mother's back. They plummeted for the ground as Hiccup pulled the belts tight around his calf, reconnecting his foot to his leg. He cranked his foot back and Toothless fanned his wings out, shooting over the rocks as the Mother turned her head.

HHHHHIIIIIIICCUUUUUUUUUUP!

Thorvane's shriek curdled Hiccup's blood as he grabbed his head. Toothless groaned and banked to the side, tumbling dangerously close to one of the Mother's legs.

DEFILER!

Dagur slapped a hand over his ear as the Mother screamed in his mind, freeing Toothless and Hiccup from his onslaught. They pulled up, soaring over the Mother's chest and towards her face, as the dragons flocking towards her twisted and flew away, screaming at the sight of Dagur. Rose and Astrid didn't look back as they finally cleared the Mother's body, hoping to fly straight for the matrons, for safety.

Dagur found the Changewing's body and glared. Hiccup's wife. And Rose, the bitch who started the rebellions. Thorvane rushed after them, Dagur sneering as he pulled his dagger from his boot, the metal coated in potent Outcast Orchid. Thorvane dove and swerved, gaining on Stingbreath with impossible speed, his teeth gnashed and his eye bleeding and his skin dancing in lightning.

Rose looked over her shoulder for a split second.

"Stingbreath, move!" she screamed. Stingbreath curled her wings in and shot down, streamlined like an arrow as the Skrill stalked her, hunted her, firing lightning bolts into the trees below. Rose pulled back on the reins, holding onto Astrid as they ascended the sky, trying to shake Dagur off their trail. They spun and twirled, darting this way and that, but Dagur prevailed when Thorvane flew next to the Changewing, throwing his wing out, slashing the claw across Stingbreath's throat.

The Changewing's head was cut clean from the rest of her body, and the dragon's writhing frame fell from the sky. Rose and Astrid screamed as they plummeted for the earth below them, high above the Mother dragon.

"NO!" Hiccup screamed. Toothless struggled to catch up, firing a plasma shot into the side of Thorvane's head. It dazed the Skrill as Toothless frantically flew for Rose and Astrid, looking between them.

He caught Rose, her belly landing on Toothless' lower back, the air whooshing out of her as Hiccup pushed his foot down, trying to catch Astrid. She was too far away, she was going to hit the ground before he made it to her â€"

Astrid's body landed on another dragon, her side hitting a scaly back. Hiccup reared and soared over the Timberjack, absolutely astonished as Snowdrop smiled up him with a toothy grin.

"Hello, Hup!" Snowdrop cried.

"I told you to go home!" Hiccup yelled, as Rose stared down at her, jaw dropped.

Snowdrop glared at him, and she stuck out her tongue. Hiccup gawked and threw his hands up, flapping them over his head.

"Snowdrop!"

"What?!" she pouted.

"Go home!"

"No, Breakfast and I are staying here!"

"You named your dragon Breakfast?! Why?!"

"Because I like breakfast, okay?!"

Rose shut her mouth, looking at Astrid's curled up body and Snowdrop again. She snorted a laugh when she realized Snowdrop had no idea that Breakfast had caught Astrid.

"Snow, look behind you!" she cried. Snowdrop huffed, but she looked over her shoulder.

The tiny squeal she made out of her mouth forced Hiccup to crack up, a laugh snorting through his nose as Snowdrop almost fell off Breakfast. She jumped and raised her arms in the air as Astrid crawled behind Snowdrop, straddling the beast beneath stiff legs and reaching over to grab the reins.

"Astrid!" Snowdrop squealed. "I found you! I knew I would find you, I knew it, I knew it!"

Astrid wrapped an arm around her little sister, burying her face in Snowdrop's fuzzy hair. "I knew you would," she sighed, crushing her sister.

Rose's head darted to the sky as Thorvane's shadow flew ahead. Hiccup and Rose turned violently, Toothless shrieking and roaring as he barely avoided Dagur's knife. Astrid, one arm around Snowdrop and the other clutching the reins, pulled the beast back and around, sailing out of the way with Breakfast's massive wings as Dagur and Thorvane shot down.

"We've got to get him off that thing," Hiccup growled. He looked down the Mother Dragon, who watched Dagur fly overhead. "I've got an idea!"

They dove and flew straight for Thorvane.

"What are you doing?!" Rose cried.

Hiccup cranked his foot, stopping Toothless. The Night Fury fanned out his long wings and roared, challenging Thorvane. The dragons locked eyes. Dagur and Hiccup glared at each other. Thorvane lurched forward, Dagur's knife clutched in Dagur's bloody fist as they shot towards them. Toothless twisted and dropped out of the sky. When

Thorvane's huge body passed overhead, Hiccup urged Toothless to fly up and over the Skrill.

"Take the reins!" Hiccup yelled. He reached down and pulled back the gear on Toothless' saddle, forcing his tail-fin open for a moment. He unhooked himself and jumped up, jumping over Toothless' head into the empty air.

"Hiccup!" Rose screamed. She pulled herself forward, slamming her foot in Toothless' tail-shift as Hiccup flailed his arms about before landing on Thorvane's head. He felt his prosthetic leg which was still turned to fly Toothless, and only consisted of a thin peg crunch into the top of Thorvane's skull. Dagur screamed at him as Thorvane thrashed around. He swung his hand in the air, brandishing the blade, stabbing it down. Hiccup leaned back, throwing his arms and back out of the way as Dagur sank the blade into Thorvane's neck.

The poison burned his flesh, filling his veins with fire. Thorvane's remaining eye rolled to the back of his head. The lightning shuddered and froth filled his mouth. They were above the Mother now, her eyes looking up at them as Dagur leapt on top of Hiccup, throwing them off the beast as it fell to its death.

They fought in the air, twisting and turning as Dagur held onto Hiccup. Hiccup grabbed the fire-sword still embedded in Dagur's belly, but was not strong enough to pull it free. However, he could twist it. He cranked the blade over and Dagur screamed. Hiccup pushed himself free. Dagur fell below Hiccup, and Hiccup thrust his hands into the loops on the outside of his legs. He pulled them out and his flying suit burst forth, carrying him into the air.

The Mother Dragon, her eyes in slits, opened her gigantic mouth as Dagur screamed, falling between her jaws. The Mother closed them around his tiny body and growled, clenching her teeth and lowering her head.

Toothless flew under Hiccup and caught him, turning away from the Mother. Rose threw a fist in the air, crying out as the Mother bowed her head.

"SAVIOUR!" she screamed in pure joy. "SAVIOUR!"

Toothless barked and cooed, twirling in the air as Astrid smiled up at them, laughing in relief. Snowdrop clapped and Valka and Stoick all caught their breaths as Thorvane's body smashed in the ocean and sank beneath the waves.

"Dagur I saw him I saw him fall!" one the Berserkers cried.
"He's he's dead!"

"Do we keep fighting?" another Berserker asked. He looked over to the Outcasts ships as they carried the prisoners from the port, everyone staring up at the Mother Dragon in awe.

"No!" Alvin replied. "We sail out of the bay!"

"You're not our leader!" a Berserker retorted.

"I am, now!" Alvin spat. "Now turn your sails south!"

Stoick and Valka's dragons carried themselves across the water, flying for Hiccup and his Night Fury, crying out in jubilation. Dagur was dead. Dagur and his reign had ended. The people were almost free, only a few Berserker ships remained loyal to Dagur and that was nothing compared to â€"

The Dragon Mother jolted upright, screaming into the air.

NOOOOOOOOO!

She thrashed her head around, growling and snuffing and bellowing.

Toothless convulsed and contorted with the voice as the Mother thrashed her head about, knocking dragons out of the sky with her crown of massive spikes. Rose and Hiccup screamed as Toothless lost control, spinning wildly until they hit the ground. They flew off Toothless' back and into the rocks ahead, bouncing off them and rolling over and over, resting among the gravel limply.

Breakfast howled out, along with every other dragon around them, as they began to quiver and shake, falling out of the sky like flies in the cold. Valka and Stoick cried out as their dragons groaned and dove.

"Stoick!" she cried.

"Valka!"

Stoick leapt off Skullcrusher's back, grabbing Valka off Cloudjumper as he fell from the sky, and the two of them soared over the snow-covered field until the landed in the powder. Every dragon rider was bucked off their dragons as the dragons were forced to ground.

Astrid struggled to hold onto Breakfast's reins as he twisted and flapped his wings about uncontrollably. The tip of his wing slammed into one of the Mother's spikes, snapping it over. The two sisters flew from Breakfast's back. Snowdrop screamed and Astrid shot her hand out, grabbing Snowdrop's fur jacket with her fist. She hauled Snowdrop against her and wrapped herself around her as they flipped in the air, covering her little sister's head and neck with her arms. She slammed into the ground, her back crunching over a large, sharp rock. Her world went dark and her body relaxed like a ragdoll. The battle went eerily silent as the air became blank, dragons lying in the snow, floating in the water, all silent, all still.

The Mother reared her head and opened her mouth, crying out in anguish.

What have you done?! she screamed.

Her mouth was bloody, dripping red onto the snow below her. She drooled and foam lined her lips as her head slumped forward, swaying back and forth before her head hit the ground. A massive plume of snow and steam flew around her and the island rocked as the Mother's strength faded. She gasped like a fish on land for air, her jaws open as blood and foamed flowed forth, staining the snow pink and red.

* * *

><p>The cove shattered. The ground rumbled beneath the tree, and Valkyrie threw her arms out to catch herself. The ground turned into glass, breaking into a thousand pieces and falling into an endless abyss of stars. Only the tree remained, and Valkyrie tried to hold on, tried to keep herself from falling. The walls all caved in, disappearing into dust. She fell back, trying to grab her woven rope. Her feet felt the branch and she flipped over, almost falling into the abyss. But the rope stopped her. It tightened around her waist, wrapped under her arm, and around her throat, holding her from the outside world as she struggled for air, the rope tightening around her neck.<p>

* * *

><p>Ruffnut gasped for air as she swam to the surface of the ocean. Barf and Belch lie on the shore, and Tuffnut broke the surface next to her. They both sputtered for air, kicking their legs, trying to breathe as their lungs contracted from the cold. Ruffnut searched the sky, trying to find Hiccup. When she couldn't, she swam to the shore. She dragged herself into the snow and shivered, but forced herself to her feet. She helped Tuffnut before she started running towards the Mother.<p>

"Where are you going?" Tuffnut asked.

"I just saw Hiccup go down!" Ruffnut cried. "Come on!"

Fishlegs stumbled from under a snowbank towards Meatlug, who didn't move. Snotlout had landed on a boat, his unconscious body dangling from the ropes that ensnared him against the sail.

* * *

><p>Hiccup opened his eyes, pain shooting up his body. He coughed and pushed himself up and out of the snow. He grabbed his arm, staggered to his feet, and looked in horror upon the Mother's body. She kicked and gasped for air. There were no dragons in the sky above him. Rose sat up, holding her side, as Hiccup limped towards the Mother, who was too far away for him to run to.<p>

Rose looked upon her in the distance in shock, questions running so fast through her head she couldn't keep track.

"Toothless?" Hiccup called, regaining his voice. "Toothless?!"

Rose looked around with him, the pair of them stumbling alone, injured and terrified. He found his Night Fury curled under under snow, his eyes closed and his mouth open.

"Toothless!" Hiccup cried. He ran as fast as his hurt legs would let him. Rose followed him closely, worry filling her heart as she bounded after him.

Hiccup was about to reach down to him before the dragon roared, scrambling to his feet, panting and shaking his head. Hiccup jumped back and Toothless bared his teeth at him, hissing, his eyes in slits.

"â€|Bud?" Hiccup asked slowly. The Night Fury hissed again, swiping a paw at Hiccup. "Whoa, whoa, what are you doing?!
Toothless!"

Toothless hung his head, swaying back and forth. Rose and Hiccup stared at him, their faces cloudy with fear and confusion.

"Talk to me," Hiccup breathed. "Can â€" can you hear me?" Hiccup asked, raising a hand to Toothless as he tried to take a step forward. "It's meâ€| Hiccupâ€|"

Toothless' eyes remained in slits as he backed away. Hiccup stepped forward, closing the distance between them. Hiccup reached his hand out, about to touch Toothless' face. But the Night Fury, spooked and blank, reared on his hind legs and swatted Hiccup's arm open with his claw. Hiccup cried out, skittered back, holding his arm in disbelief as Rose grabbed him and pulled him away. He growled and turned around, running away, his tail flicking as he left.

"Toothless, wait!" Hiccup cried. He tried to run after him, but Rose held him firm. Hiccup watched his dragon go, trying to understand, trying to figure out what happened. He pressed his palm against his arm, trying to stanch the blood as Toothless disappeared. He squeezed his hand shut and looked at his wound â€" four deep gashes on back of his forearm, clean through the hide of his dragon suit. Rose came around him and put her hand under it, watching it as it didâ€| nothing.

The skin didn't move around the wound. It bled freely. It didn't heal. Hiccup and Rose both looked at it, their hearts picking up in speed, as Rose remembered her own words:

"Heartbroken, she looked down and found her lover had turned into a dragon, only mortal and smaller than herself. Together, they created all the dragons we know of today, and each of them inherited the Mother's bond, all because of her sacrifice."

Rose spun to the Mother, who lied in the snow, struggling for air as foam coated her teeth.

"The Mother's fading â€" something's wrong."

She tripped forward, breaking into a full-blown sprint towards the Mother.

"Rose!"

Hiccup threw himself after her, looking towards Toothless' footprints in the snow before running after her. He caught up to her.

"Why are we running?" Hiccup panted. "What's wrong with Toothless?"

"Our bonds â€"" Rose grunted, ducking under the Mother's wing, which lied propped against the ruins of the mountain. "Our bonds are broken!"

"What?!"

"Whatever happened to the Mother, it's shattered the bonds â€“ everything from Toothless' connection to you to his personality, his magic, everything is blank!"

"Wait, so Toothless â€“"

Rose stopped and threw her hands up, facing Hiccup frantically. "He doesn't remember you â€“ he doesn't understand anything! Can you hear any of the dragons, any whisper?! No! Because there's nothing there anymore, just emptiness, because the Mother's strength, her own magic, is waning!"

"How do you know all this?" Hiccup asked quickly. "Maybe Toothless was stunned, maybe â€“"

"It's all in the stories, Hiccup. Look at your arm! It's not healing! And it's not just us, it's every dragon in existence. Their minds, their will, their personalities are all in jeopardy!"

* * *

><p>Snowdrop wailed and screamed, shaking Astrid's limp body in the snow, only a few feet from the Mother's panting mouth. "Astrid!" she shrieked. "Get up! Get up!"</p>

Dragons all around her began to stir, their breaths ragged and their eyes darting this way and that. A blue Zippalback lifted his head off the ground and turned to Snowdrop as her cries tore through him. He snarled and fanned out his wings, his twin heads eyeing Snowdrop's little body with bloodlust.

Snowdrop stared at it in terror. She knew the dragon wasn't friendly anymore, and she shook Astrid again.

"Astrid!" she howled. "C'mon, get up!"

The Zippalback charged, mindlessly craving Snowdrop's flesh. He stormed towards her and she screamed again, crawling back on her behind, holding her hand up to try to stop it before it tore her apart.

Valka and Stoick leapt onto the beast, grabbing a head each. The dragon roared as Stoick twisted his head around painfully while Valka had a dagger buried in the other's jaw. One of the heads bit Stoick's arm and the other threw Valka into the ground. The dragon flew away, whimpering, ascending to the dragons that swarmed above.

Stoick rushed over to Snowdrop, barely paying mind to his bloody mess of an arm, scooping her up and cradling her to his chest. She sobbed and blubbered, but Stoick hushed her as Valka dropped next to Astrid. She lifted Astrid's head and gave her a shake.

"Astrid? Astrid!"

She rested her head over Astrid's chest, and heard a faint heartbeat patter beneath her. She ran her hands down Astrid's body, checking her sides, her hips â€“

When Valka's fingers hovered over Astrid's pelvis, the feeling of jagged, broken bones struck her heart with an arrow of ice. Astrid

moaned gently, her eyes slowly drifting open, her mouth trying to form words. Valka quickly returned to Astrid's face.

"Can you hear me?" Valka asked quickly. A tiny smudge of red teased Valka's eyes as it peeked from the corner of Astrid's mouth. Astrid blinked slowly, fluttering and struggling for a pathetic breath.

"M-My legs," Astrid coughed weakly.

Valka pressed her hand against Astrid hips. "Can â€“ can you feel that?"

"Feel what?" Astrid slurred. Everything from the waist-down was numb. Valka looked down, and saw a sharp rock at her knees â€“ a wedge made of stone peeking out from the packed snow â€“ the object that shattered Astrid's spine. She looked up to Stoick, fear all over her face.

"Help me move her, under the wing."

Stoick put Snowdrop down and picked up Astrid's body, holding her as gently as they could as they carefully carried her under the protection of the wing. They rested her on the ground overtop of Stoick's cape and propped her head up on another rock. Valka held her hand and brushed Astrid's hair away from her face as Astrid coughed again, blood specks vibrant on her pale lips.

"Mum!"

Valka turned and saw Rose and Hiccup working their way towards them, ducking under the crystals of the Mother's wing. They could hardly breath and both of them doubled over, sucking in deep gulps of air. Hiccup saw Astrid lying on the fur and he dropped next to her.

"What happened?" he asked quickly, cupping Astrid's face.

"She broke her back when she landed," Valka replied, licking her lips. "Her bond should be healing it, she â€“" Valka stopped talking when Hiccup snapped his head up to face her, and Rose made a small sound in her throat. "Whatâ€¦ what's the matter?"

Hiccup turned away, his face burning, unable to breathe as he desperately looked upon Astrid's faint face. Rose clenched her jaw and looked down.

"Weâ€¦ lost our bondsâ€¦" she murmured.

Valka and Stoick and Snowdrop only stared at Rose, unblinking, processing her words. Rose looked up tearfully.

"Astrid'sâ€¦ not going to be able to heal, anymoreâ€¦"

48. The Saviour

Chapter Forty-Eight: The Saviour

Hiccup held Astrid's broken, pale body against him, his whole body shaking. Astrid opened her eyes slowly and gave him a weak smile as

Valka, Stoick, Rose, and Snowdrop surrounded them, their lips quivering and their eyes wet. Hiccup reached around Astrid's body, reaching behind her, feeling down her spine. He felt the break, a place the line suddenly ended. A sob tore from his throat as he clutched Astrid to him.

"No â€“" he choked. He sucked in a breath and broke down, sharp, heartbreaking sobs ripping his body apart.

Rose couldn't bear it. She covered her mouth and walked away, stumbling for the Mother Dragon. She walked across as snow began to fall around her. The dragons tore each other apart above, bits of them falling out of the sky, as they tried to assert some kind of dominance over each other.

Kindnessâ€| loveâ€| compassionâ€| trustâ€|

The dragons couldn't remember that anymore. They felt nothingâ€| mindlessnessâ€| chaos.

Rose choked on her tears, gritting her teeth, watching them hurt each other in the sky. She looked away, holding her face, before she looked up through her fingers to the Mother.

The Mother's mouth trickled with pink foam, her eyes fixed on the destruction above her. Her childrenâ€| her babiesâ€| torn down to nothing. Andâ€| she was crying. Tears fell from her huge eyes of blue and violet, coloured like the Gate of Valhalla. Rose rested a gentle hand against the mother's face, looking deep into the pupil that was ten times the size of her. The Mother's eye flicked down, a groan â€“ a cry â€“ a sob â€“ coughing from her drooling mouth.

Outcast Orchid. Rose shook her head and sobbed again. Something from a flower so smallâ€| so beautifulâ€| so deadlyâ€|

"Shhâ€|" Rose whispered, wishing she could hear the dragon speak back to her. "I'mâ€| I'm hereâ€|"

She sat next to the dragon and rested her cheek against it, staying with her as she kept trying to breathe.

The Mother stared at Rose, thinking back thousands of years to her loverâ€| a man of red hair, and strong jawâ€| and a perfect heartâ€| like Spirit Weaverâ€| and if Rose, the final reminder of her lover long past, was the last thing she looked uponâ€| she would rest well.

Valkyrie kicked and tried to climb her rope, but the rope began to choke the life out of her. There was nothing below her, nothing but stars and clouds. She squeezed her eyes shut, willing the last bit of herself forth, trying to send one last message.

"Mum," she choked through her teeth, her lips turning blue. "I â€“ can't â€“ breathe â€“"

Astrid gasped a small gasp, coughing out of her lung that slowly filled with blood from a broken rib.

"Hiccup," she choked.

Everyone leaned in as Hiccup pulled away, pressing his forehead to hers. He sucked in a breath to calm himself. "Y-Yes?"

Astrid grabbed his hand, squeezing it as tightly as she could. "The baby â€""

She choked and coughed, and blood spattered Hiccup's cheek. Her teeth were red, her breaths were quickening. Stoick and Valka furrowed their brows and looked to each other. Did they just hear her right?

"Our baby?" Hiccup asked, holding her head against his, even as blood speckled across his face with her every breath. "We're going to take you to the matrons, you're gonna â€" you're gonna have it in a safe place, at home â€""

"No â€"" Astrid breathed, shaking her head. "She â€" she can't breathe. Andâ€| and I'm running outâ€| of timeâ€|"

"Don't say that," Hiccup growled, holding her tighter. "Don't say that, no, you â€" you're gonna be fine â€""

Astrid's face contorted into sadness, and she gasped for another breath as Valka's and Stoick's eyes filled with tears.

"My body is broken," she whispered hoarsely. "You have to get her outâ€|"

"C-Can you push?" Hiccup asked as the heavy realization dawned on everyone else. Valka's eyes overflowed with tears, her throat constricting and her nose stinging as Stoick felt as if he'd been hit in the gut. Snowdrop's lower lip quivered, her big eyes glassy. "If you push, then mum and I will pull it free, and â€""

Astrid shook her head slightly. "â€|No, my loveâ€| I can't feel anything anymoreâ€|" Her pale lips pursed as she rubbed them together. "You haveâ€| toâ€| cutâ€|"

"No," Hiccup spat. "No, I'm not doing that to you, I'm not doing that, we're â€""

"She can't breathe," Astrid choked. A tear ran out of her eye and created a run through her bloody cheek. "If you don't, she'll dieâ€|"

"If I do, then you will."

"I've seen these things performed in the past," Valka said gently. "I've seen women survive them."

But Hiccup knew Astrid better than anyone else. With her back shattered, her legs uselessâ€| she would rather perish than suffer a life like this. Hiccup broke down, sobbing awful, gut-wrenching sobs. Stoick and Valka all silently wept as Astrid lifted a hand. She rested it in his hair, and smoothed it over, feeling the braids she had braided into it three moons beforehand. His head fell onto her stomach, and he shook his head.

"Do youâ€| remember what I told youâ€|?" Astrid asked shakily, gently, barely above a whisper. "The nightâ€| I was taken from

youâ€| ?"

Hiccup looked up, and Astrid smiled at him again, her eyes drooping.

"I made you promise me," she whispered. "You promised meâ€| that you would keep going. You promised me thatâ€| if something happens to meâ€| you would fight on, that â€" that you would do whatever it takesâ€| "

"But I'm not the fighter, you are," Hiccup hiccuped. "I said that, I still mean it, you've always been the fighter â€""

"Weâ€| are _all_â€| fightersâ€| Hiccup."

Astrid cupped his cheek and pulled his face against hers. She kissed his lips and pressed her forehead against his. "I can't fight anymoreâ€| "

"No, you can â€""

"I can'tâ€| " Astrid murmured, taking a deep breath. "Our baby is tryingâ€| You have to give her a fair chanceâ€| "

"But she'll need you," Hiccup cried, sniffing loudly and sighing.

"She'll have _you_, " Astrid smiled again, blood trickling out of the corner of her mouth. Hiccup wiped a thumb over it, as if it would make everything better, but all it did was create a horrid red crimson streak across her flesh.

"I â€" I have a knife," Valka rasped. "If I â€""

"No," Hiccup snarled, trying to keep himself together.

"Hiccup â€""

"I said no!" Hiccup yelled to Stoick. "We â€" we'll figure something else out â€""

Suddenly, Rose screamed from around the corner, and everyone froze as they heard a terribly familiar sound...

Dagur's laugh.

Valka and Stoick all jumped, but Hiccup refused to leave Astrid, as if he hadn't heard.

"Come out, Hiccup," Dagur growled, panting from around the wing.

"Don't do it!" Rose cried.

"Do it or I'll kill your friend!"

"Goâ€| " Astrid told him.

"No â€""

"I ONLY want Hiccup," Dagur spat, and Rose cried out again, something hurting her. "If I see anyone else, the girl dies. You have three seconds! One!"

Astrid pushed him away. "Goâ€|"

"Astrid â€"

"Two!"

"We'll watch her, don't worry," Valka said quickly, desperate for him to run out before harm came Rose's way.

"Three!"

"Wait!" Hiccup yelled. He shakily kissed Astrid again and stood on his feet, refusing to tear his eyes off Astrid's pale, failing face. "I'm coming out!"

"Fightâ€|" Astrid said once more, smiling again. "I know you canâ€|"

Hiccup closed his eyes and took a deep breath. "I'll be right back, don't do anything, just hold on."

He staggered away from them, and turned his back on Astrid. He gritted his teeth and ran out, turning the corner of the wing. Astrid's eyes followed him before she coughed again. Her smile faded and her hand trailed to her stomach. She loved Hiccup. She always had, from when they were kids to now. But even after so long of knowing each other, Astrid knew Hiccup. And she knew herself, and she knew she was always capable of making her own decisions, never minding the consequences in times like these.

"Birdsongâ€|" she wheezed. "Valkaâ€|"

"I'm here," Valka whispered, grabbing her hand. Astrid looked up to her, her eyes red and swollen.

"â€|Do it."

* * *

><p>Hiccup stumbled into the bright light of the snow-covered ground, bright from the sky above. He looked up slowly, rage building inside him, the feeling of Astrid's broken spine lingering on his fingertips. Dagur held his poisoned dagger under Rose's throat, the other arm around Rose's shoulders. He trembled where he stood, covered in drool and foam.<p>

"Surprise," Dagur smiled. Rose wrenched against him, but Dagur pressed the blade to her skin. "I wouldn't do that, love," he chuckled. "There's still poison on this blade, it'll turn you into jelly."

"What did you do to the Mother?" Hiccup spat, stopping on one side of the snowy patch.

Dagur scoffed. "You really think even she can stop me?" he asked huskily. "Once I buried my knife into her tongue and sliced it as I

fell into her throat, she was done for. This poisonâ€œ leaves no survivors."

"Hiccup â€œ" Rose begged. "Run â€œ"

"No," Hiccup growled. "We're finishing this."

Dagur grinned, his scarred face twisting menacingly. "With what?" he laughed. "You gave me your sword."

Hiccup grimaced at the sight of Dagur's puckered skin surrounding his fire-sword in a flesh prison, still protruding from either side of his body.

"And I don't see Astrid anywhere, either."

Hiccup sneered, his hands curling into fists.

"And your Night Furyâ€œ gone, too? What's left really?" Dagur asked. "You're nothing without them, nothing but a cripple, a poor excuse for a Viking, a pathetic waste of a chief."

"You're wrong."

Dagur's tongue trailed across his lips. "Ohâ€œ I don't think so."

"You may have a dagger in your hand," Hiccup said coldly. "But I have more than you can imagine. More than your stupid fucking butter-knife covered in flower juice."

Dagur shoved Rose out of the way and raised his hand over head, brandishing his knife and screaming into the frigid air. Hiccup ducked out of the way as Rose tripped and hit the ground. Hiccup threw his entire body into Dagur's, throwing the pair of them into the snow. He straddled Dagur and landed a punch across his jaw, screaming out in the heaviest outrage he had ever felt in his life. Dagur's head snapped to the side with Hiccup's fist, but he didn't waver. He tried to bury the knife into Hiccup's back.

Hiccup grabbed Dagur's wrist, trying to wrench the blade from his hand. The men rolled to the side as Rose jumped to her feet. Dagur was on top of Hiccup now, the blade in the air once more. Rose screamed and hurled herself into Dagur's arm, sinking her teeth into his wrist. Dagur was torn from Hiccup as Rose's mouth filled with Dagur's blood. He held onto the knife and swung his other fist around, connecting with the bridge of Rose's nose. There was a crack, and the air blew out of Rose's mouth. Her eyes rolled, her mind dazed, her body stunned next to Dagur.

Dagur laughed again, holding Rose's throat with one hand and stabbing the knife down with the other. Rose turned her head and the knife barely missed her skin. She grabbed the hilt of the fire-sword, twisting it as hard as she could. Terrible, horrifying pain sent him howling, and the hilt was torn from Rose's grasp as he jumped back. Hiccup grabbed a fistful of Dagur's wet hair and he swung him around, throwing his body into a cluster of crystals on the Mother's neck.

* * *

><p>Valka pulled her sweater from her body, practically tearing it free from her skin. She wore a torn shirt underneath as she handed Stoick the sweater.</p>

Snowdrop touched Astrid's face with a small hand. "Astrid?" she whimpered.

Astrid looked upon her fondly, keeping her gaze away Valka's hands. "Hey, Terror."

"What are they doing?" she asked in a tiny voice.

"Do you remember when I told youâ€| that I had a person inside me?"

Snowdrop nodded, but she looked towards Valka as she cut the lower half of her shirt free.

"Look at me, Snow," Astrid said. "Do you remember?"

"Yeah," Snowdrop replied. "I-I do."

"Well, that baby is still inside me, and Valka's going to get her out."

Snowdrop shook her head. "No, no, I don't want the baby, I want you to get up."

"I'm not getting up," Astrid murmured. "Justâ€| just look at me, okay?"

Snowdrop rested her head on Astrid's chest, sighing sadly, tears still flowing. Astrid put an arm under Snowdrop's head, and she smiled again.

"Guess what?"

"What?"

"I saw mama," Astrid smiled.

Valka placed a hand on Astrid's stomach, pushing down with her fingers, sweat beading on her forehead as she tried to find the best place.

"Really?" Snowdrop sniffled. Astrid nodded.

"She's with papa, now," Astrid said, "but she told me you would find me. She said she knew you would."

Snowdrop smiled up at her. Valka found the stiffness within Astrid, pushing down again to make sure.

"She said she misses you, and she'll always be with you. Forever and ever."

"And so will you?" Snowdrop asked, a sob hiccupping out of her little mouth.

Another tear tumbled out of her eyes. "Foreverâ€| and everâ€|"

* * *

><p>Hiccup slammed Dagur's hand into the crystal clusters over and over again, screaming and grunting as he felt the bones in Dagur's hand break like twigs. Dagur dropped the knife, but he cracked his head into Hiccup's. Hiccup jumped back and Dagur hissed through his teeth as they glared at each other, ready to attack.</p>

Dagur's eyes darted to his wrist, where Rose's bloody tooth marks remained. He glared at them, holding his hand in front of his face. Hiccup grinned as Dagur shook his hand, trying to coax it to heal.

"It won't heal!" Hiccup scoffed. "You destroyed that power the moment you poisoned the Mother!"

Dagur shrieked and sprinted for Hiccup. Hiccup bared his teeth and Rose snarled as Dagur ran for Hiccup. Hiccup grabbed one of the loops attached to his flight suit and wrenched on it. He knew from sewing it himself that if he pulled it a certain way, it would tear right off, and when the leather ripped off Hiccup's suit, he flung it over Dagur's face. Rose jumped onto Dagur's back and wrapped her arms around his neck, holding the leather around his face as he swung out blindly.

"Get the dagger!" Rose screamed as she struggled to hold on. "Get it!"

Hiccup scrambled for it under the Mother's neck, but he couldn't find it in the snow. Dagur reached behind him and grabbed Rose's hair. He hauled her forward, bending over and kicking up his backside to fling her over his head. Rose slammed into the ground and Dagur stomped his foot into her gut. She curled into a ball, struggling for air, as Dagur turned and rushed Hiccup.

Hiccup only had enough time to stand before Dagur punched him under the chin. Hiccup stumbled back among the crystals, cracking his head against them. Dagur grabbed his throat and squeezed, laughing and growling in Hiccup's face.

"Second time's the charm," Dagur cackled as he shoved Hiccup into the sharp, pointed hide of the Mother. Hiccup kicked his leg forward, burying his metal leg into Dagur's shin. He cringed, but it only fuelled his rage as he closed his hands around tighter and tighter.

A rock smashed into the back of Dagur's head. He let go of Hiccup to hold it, grunting and stumbling in pain. He spun around to rip apart the person who threw it.

He almost didn't recognize the person storming towards him, another rock in hand. But to Ruffnut, there was no mistake. She hurled another rock at him, hitting him in the face as Hiccup coughed, holding his throat. Dagur held his nose before he looked up at Ruffnut's wet body, her cheeks red and her fists ready.

"You Berkians don't stay dead," Dagur snarked bitingly. Ruffnut scowled.

"It helps if you actually kill them," she replied.

Dagur laughed. Tuffnut appeared from behind his sister, their matching eyes glaring straight at Dagur. Hiccup clambered to his feet and Rose rolled over onto her hands and knees as Dagur looked around himself.

He was surrounded.

Valka unsheathed her knife and crawled to Astrid's other side. She pressed the knife against Astrid's skin. Astrid didn't feel a thing as she stared at her sister's face, grounding herself as it became harder to breathe.

Dagur flung the first punch, almost hitting Hiccup before Ruffnut jumped on him. She beat down on his head with her fist twice before he kneed her in the groin. She gasped and crumpled, and Dagur twisted her wrist around behind her back. He grabbed her jaw and tried to break her neck, but Rose jumped on his back. Dagur ran back, slamming Rose into the flat edge of a crystal spike again and again until she cracked her head so hard, she went limp.

Ruffnut stomped her heel down and crunched Dagur's foot before she threw her elbow back into Dagur's gut. He doubled over, but he managed to grab Ruffnut's arm and, a scream erupting from his throat, hurled her around until her face smashed into the dragon's hide. She joined Rose on the ground as Tuffnut moved to her, trying to get to her before Dagur did, but Dagur threw his body into Tuffnut like a battering ram. They sprawled out in the snow and Dagur kicked Tuffnut off him, sending him flying and rolling across the snowy patch.

Hiccup dropped to the ground and swung his leg out, tripping Dagur. He tried to grab the fire-sword but Dagur blocked his hand. He twisted Hiccup's wrist over and Hiccup gasped. Dagur laughed at him as he cringed and tried to pull away, but he was too weak.

"Four Berkians later, and the Berserker remains," Dagur growled in Hiccup's face, smiling. Dagur wrenched his hand violently, breaking Hiccup's arm at the elbow. The sound of bone and cartilage snapping in a collection of teeth-curling pops and snaps sent Hiccup into a frenzy. He screamed, but Dagur didn't let go. "You are laughable. You are nothing."

"No!" Hiccup seethed.

Rose groaned in the snow, blood in her hair. She tried to move her legs but disorientation weighed her down. She tried to say Hiccup's name, watching blurry versions of him writhing and reeling.

Ruffnut lifted her head out of the snow, her face broken and bloody, only able to see out of one eye, and caught glimpse of a glint right in front of her face.

"You will fall, and when I'm done with you, I'm going for Berk. And when I get there, I won't rest until every Berkian bone is broken."

Valka dropped the knife, reaching in.

Dagur wrenched Hiccup's arm up and Hiccup fell to his knees, holding his shoulder as he felt the bones grind against each other, gasping and wheezing and strangled cries oozing from his mouth.

"People will know us, not as exiles, but as gods," Dagur hissed. "And I will teach the world about how to train dragons, and they will never speak your name again."

He grabbed Hiccup's head and kneed him in the face. Hiccup fell back, eyes fluttering.

Astrid struggled to breath as she felt Valka's hands deep within her, brushing against the bottoms of her lungs, holding onto Snowdrop for dear life. She stared at the wing above her, listening to the fight on the other side of the webbing, so close.

Dagur laughed as he stared down at Hiccup's shivering body as he tried to sit up. He kicked Hiccup's chest, shoving him back in the snow.

Astrid's air flew out of her as she felt something inside her shift. Valka grabbed her knife again, thrusting it inside as fast as she safely could. Astrid listened for Hiccup but couldn't hear him, and a breath caught in her throat.

"Hic-Hiccup!" she cried feebly.

Ruffnut reached for the dagger, grabbing it in her bloody hand.

"And when I leave your body to rot on this island, I'm going to watch your Night Fury get torn apart into tiny pieces," Dagur continued.

"Stoick, hand me the sweater!" Valka cried.

Dagur lifted his foot and hovered his boot over Hiccup's face, ready to stomp the life out of him, ready to stain the dirty snow.

"Come on!" Valka begged. She pulled again and Astrid heard a gush. Valka gasped. She threw the knife out of her hand and she leaned forward, pulling something into the cold air. Stoick threw the sweater over Valka's hands as Astrid looked away from the wing above, the life draining out of her with every second. Snowdrop lifted her head as Valka wrapped her nose around the baby's unmoving lips and nose, sucking the mucous out of her lungs. She spat it out and blew in the child's face, trying to encourage it to breathe.

"Valka?" Astrid wheezed. She reached up, desperate to touch the child in Valka's hand, stretching out her fingertips.

"Please, wee one, give us a scream," Stoick begged. Valka, eyes wild as she gave the little bundle a rough rub, closed her mouth over the child's face again as Stoick looked on. "Come on!"

Time slowed for Astrid. She hardly had any energy left as the ground and furs beneath her grew wet and warm. Stoick pressed the strips of Valka's shirt against the gash across her abdomen, but she couldn't feel it. Her entire world became tied, became bonded, to the tiny body in Valka's red hands, to the silent being within the sweater.

"Valkyrie!" Astrid breathed, tears streaming over her cheeks.
"Please!"

"I hope Valhalla leaves you stranded at the gates," Dagur sighed. Hiccup coughed and peeled open his eyes, squinting at Dagur's sole above his face.

"Hiccup, no!" Rose screamed, trying to get up.

Hiccup squeezed his eyes shut. Toothless's entire family wouldn't survive this day. He tried. He fought as hard as he could and he failed. Dagur clenched his jaw and sneered, a tiny smirk on his mouth, before he drove his boot towards the earth.

Suddenly, a shrill, tiny scream shot through the air. Hiccup's eyes snapped open as Dagur faltered, his glare resting on the wing, his boot one inch from Hiccup's eyes. He put his foot down next to Hiccup's head, entirely forgetting as he tried to place the sound behind the wing only a few feet away. He stepped over Hiccup and walked towards it, slowly, suspiciously.

Hiccup growled as his blood roared into flame, sending him newfound energy and life. He rolled over and watched Dagur near the webbing of the wing. He screamed and shoved himself forward, grabbing onto Dagur, wrapping his good arm around his neck.

"DON'T YOU DARE!" Hiccup shrieked. Dagur grabbed Hiccup's arm and pushed it up, trying to get Hiccup's elbow over his face. But Hiccup dug his fingers into Dagur's eye, refusing to let go, refusing to give up and blood squirted between his fingers. Dagur howled and Hiccup pulled on his hand, turning Dagur's head as he stumbled blindly. Dagur tried to slam Hiccup's back into the hide, but Hiccup had his feet ready. They landed on the hide and he grounded himself before he jumped forward.

Dagur spun and crashed to the ground, sending Hiccup sprawling. He rolled over his shoulder but landed on one of his feet. Hiccup held his arm to himself as it dangled limply at his side. Dagur got up, holding his face as he snarled. He charged for Hiccup. Hiccup watched him approach and waited, waited as he listened to the beautiful song of his daughter, waited as he reached behind him.

Dagur lunged for Hiccup, but Hiccup pulled his leg free, tearing the metal piece from his calf. He swung it and smashed Dagur across the face, shattering his teeth and almost knocking him out. The force Hiccup used to injure him sent his own body twisting, straining the muscles in his shoulder and arm. Dagur fell into the snow and crawled onto his hands and knees, blood drooling out of his mouth. He slowly staggered to his feet as Hiccup readied himself with his leg for another blow, anything to keep Dagur away from his family.

He lumbered around, his jaw misshapen and his eye nothing but black and red. He panted and yet, after all the injuries the Berkians had managed to inflict upon him, nothing phased him. He smiled and laughed, spitting out a mouthful of blood onto the snow. He staggered towards Hiccup, arms out, the two men ready to fight to the death.

Ruffnut wrapped her arm around Dagur and pulled him back, stopping

him in his tracks. Hiccup watched her as she restrained him, barely using any force. She pressed her face against the side of his and held him back.

"You really should have killed me, you bastard," she whispered in his ear.

She had the dagger in her grasp, and she drove it into Dagur neck. Dagur's eyes widened and his screams gargled silently as she let him go, kicking him to the ground. She stepped over him as he tried to pull the dagger out. Rose kicked his clawing hand away and Tuffnut hoisted him up onto his knees, holding him still. Rose and Tuffnut looked worse for wear, but their faces relaxed as they watched the veins around the hilt of the blade turn blue. Ruffnut helped Hiccup stand, resting his leg back into his foot, before they glowered down at their enemy as his began to fester.

"Rose, Tuffâ€| hold him still," Hiccup murmured. Dagur tried to resist but he felt the Outcast Orchid seep into his veins, filling his lungs with toxic froth. Hiccup looked to Ruffnut, knowing the horror Dagur had put her through, and looked to the hilt of the fire-sword in Dagur's belly.

Hiccup grabbed the hilt of the fire-sword with his good hand as Dagur snarled at him, and Ruffnut wrapped her hand around his, the pair of them staring into Dagur's eyes, into his evil soul.

"I hope Valhalla welcomes you," Hiccup muttered.

Dagur scoffed. "You won't kill me," he coughed, blood spewing through his teeth. "You're the Saviour. You won't kill me."

Hiccup sneered. "I'm not your Saviour."

Ruffnut and Hiccup heaved back on the sword and it tore out of Dagur's gut, dragging everything along with it. Blood, organs, and skin that had fused around the blade came with the Berkians, and Dagur's face went blank. Rose and Tuffnut let him go. Dagur fell face-first into the snow, his eyes open and vacant, his face expressionless.

49. The Spirit Weaver

We are almost at the end of our journey, my friends. I finished writing tonight. Fifty chapters in all and I'm honestly in a bit of a shock. There will be one more chappie after this, and I'll write an author's note to go with it. But let me just say that this adventure was - and still is - amazing to me. Just a final push left to go. Also, How to Train Your Dragon 2 just won Best Animated Feature at the Golden Globes. Overall, I'd say today is a really great day. _

* * *

><p>Chapter Forty-Nine: The Spirit Weaver

Astrid held onto Valkyrie with Valka's help, her face pale as Stoick pressed fabric into the incision.

"She's so tiny," Astrid mumbled, stroking the side of Valkyrie's face

with the tip of her finger. Her little face was pink and beautiful, and she stared up at Astrid with wide, green eyes. She had a head full of brown hair and she yawned, showing off her tiny mouth rimmed with pink gums.

"She's smaller than Hiccup was," Valka chuckled bitter-sweetly. Her eyes flicked up to Astrid's ghostly face, a sadness creeping in her heart. She knew Astrid's time was nearing, but she didn't want to ruin what little time they had together.

Everyone ran around the corner, their faces covered in new smears and trickles of blood. Everyone looked up and didn't breathe for a moment, before they all sighed in tearful relief. Hiccup held his arm to himself as he stumbled towards Astrid. Rose and the twins stayed standing, watching Hiccup slowly stagger to Astrid's side, sinking to his knees weakly, his eyes transfixed upon the tiny being in Astrid's arms. Snowdrop smiled at him as Hiccup reminded himself to breathe, staring.

"Look, Hup! A baby!" Snowdrop giggled.

Ruffnut and Tuffnut both looked at each other, absolutely astonished as they saw their friend cradling her child, a child they knew nothing about.

Hiccup didn't reply. Stoick reached over and clasped his arm, giving him a proud smile as tears soaked Hiccup's battered face. Valkyrie looked up and yawned again, squawking like a baby bird as she did. Hiccup smiled, a sob of happiness shaking through his shoulders. He kissed Astrid's clammy forehead and he looked upon the baby. He reached a finger out and brushed her hair, which was still gummy from the womb.

"Valkyrie," Astrid sighed proudly, blood still streaming out of her mouth. She struggled for another breath but forced one down as the family all huddled together, beaming at the child.

"You didn't say anything about a â€“ you weren't even showing!" Ruffnut blubbered. Astrid smiled.

"She didn't want to be seen," she rasped.

Rose looked over Hiccup's shoulder and couldn't help but smile. She reached over, too, to pull the sweater wrapping her down just a tad, just to see her face clearly.

"She looks like you," Rose noted happily, giving Hiccup a poke. "She'sâ€ perfect."

Snowdrop carefully touched her fingertip to the baby's nose, her mouth puckererd in thought.

"Can I name her?" she asked loudly.

"She already has a name," Astrid replied quietly. "The dragonsâ€ call her Valkyrie."

"Val â€“ Valk â€“" Snowdrop frowned, unable to get her mouth around the name. Hiccup smiled and tousled her hair.

"Don't worry, I'm sure you can think of a nickname."

Astrid looked up at Hiccup, trying to say his name, the ghost of her smile still on her face.

"Dagurâ€|"

"He will never bother us again," Hiccup replied quickly. The corners of Astrid's mouth quivered.

"I knewâ€| you could do itâ€|"

"It wasn't all me," Hiccup chuckled weakly, wincing at the pain attacking his body. "If Valkyrie didn't have your lungs, I'd have been done for."

The screams of the fighting dragons caught Rose's attention, and she pursed her lips.

"We should get out of here," she said quickly. "If those dragons smell the blood, they're going to come after us."

Hiccup looked to her and nodded. "Okayâ€| once Astrid has had enough time to settle, we'll go."

Valka and Stoick looked up from the baby, and Astrid closed her eyes slowly, her brow pained and wrinkled. Hiccup looked at everyone, confused. But then his eyes widened and he looked down, noticing the shirt remnants covering Astrid's body. He reached down with a shaky hand and grabbed the fabric.

"Don'tâ€|" Astrid whispered. Hiccup's hand hovered over her belly, his eyes full of shock and disbelief, as Valka and Stoick looked down. "Don't lookâ€|"

"No, no no, did you â€" I said not to!" Hiccup stammered, looking between the bloody fabric and Astrid's white face. "Astrid, what â€""

"I had toâ€|" Astrid murmured. "I had toâ€|"

Valka and Stoick backed away, standing and holding each other. Stoick grabbed Snowdrop gently and pulled her away, murmuring something in her ear. They left Hiccup and Astrid alone with their child, and Rose followed them, tears burning her eyes as Ruffnut and Tuffnut swallowed lumps in their throats.

Hiccup stared into Astrid's half-closed eyes, his face shaking.
"We're going to get you out â€""

"Hiccup â€""

"No!" Hiccup sobbed. "No, I â€" I just got you back, I'm not letting you give up!"

Astrid shook her head, holding onto Valkyrie gently. "I have to. Iâ€| can't feel my legsâ€| and Valkyrie couldn't breatheâ€| I had toâ€| make sure one of usâ€| made it."

Hiccup grabbed her face and looked into her eyes, struggling to

breathe.

"No, I'm getting both of you out, I'll find a way to stitch you up and â€œ"

Astrid reached up with one of her hands and she rested a hand on his cheek, her face gentle, but firm.

"You know that won't workâ€œ!"

Hiccup squeezed his eyes shut, and he rested his forehead on hers. "I already lost you, I won't lose you againâ€œ! I can'tâ€œ! I won't be able toâ€œ!"

"You will always have me," she replied. "You will see me in our daughterâ€œ! in your dreamsâ€œ!"

"It's not good enough, I â€œ"

Astrid's head slumped over slightly, and Hiccup quickly caught her. Astrid groaned and shakily swallowed.

"No, no no no no," Hiccup stuttered, holding onto Astrid's face. "Don't do this!"

Blood streamed out of Astrid's mouth again. She grimaced and coughed meekly, and stared up at him with fear in her eyes. "Justâ€œ! hold meâ€œ!"

Hiccup's eyes overflowed with tears, but he gritted his teeth and slipped his arm behind Astrid's head, pulling her limp body close to him. Astrid reached over and grabbed his broken arm, gently resting it under Valkyrie. She rested her head on his shoulder and sighed, shivering under his cheek. Hiccup rocked her back and forth gently.

"Don't let me go," she breathed, her teeth chattering and her body shivering. "I'm so coldâ€œ!"

Hiccup sobbed and kissed her forehead again. He rubbed her shoulder, his throat too tight to breathe. Astrid closed her eyes, swallowing again.

"Do you rememberâ€œ?" Astrid murmured, "â€œ! what the scroll said? The nightâ€œ! we were engaged?"

Hiccup pressed his lips against her forehead and he tangled his fingers her hair as her breaths wheezed in and out through her lips.

"Whatâ€œ! did it say?" Astrid asked. "Iâ€œ! want to knowâ€œ!"

Hiccup held her tightly, distraught and broken as Astrid slipped away from him little by little.

"It saidâ€œ! that you had to be the girl â€œ the girl who will punch me across the face when I make her angry and kiss my cheek once she realizes I'm sorry."

Astrid smiled, remembering their meeting in the cove, where she

punched him so hard before kissing him. Where she broke his nose and then showed up to the ceremony with bruises all over her face.

Hiccup sucked in a breath, remembering the words as if they were right in front of him. Valka heard him, and tears filled her eyes.

"Keepâ€| goingâ€| " Astrid coughed.

Hiccup sucked in another breath. "You're the girlâ€| who laughs at the way I look and the way I speak not because you're making fun of me, but because you adore me."

"She is strong. She is beautiful. She is perfect and maybe you're the only one who thinks soâ€| " Valka murmured under her breath, her back facing the pair. "She's the one you would die for, let a dragon kill you for, risk everything for. It's what I would do for you and if you're reading this now, it means I have done that. So look up and find her, Hiccup."

Rose looked to the head of the Mother dragon, staring at her eye, her heart broken as she heard Hiccup and Valka both say the words, both of them torn apart.

"Find her and kiss her and tell her you love her, that her name was on this scroll. A name won't mean anything to you unless it's hers, so let it be so."

Hiccup held Astrid even tighter. "Life is too short to hesitate," he finished, his chest shaking in sorrow.

"It isâ€| " Astrid replied sadly. "Too shortâ€| butâ€| I'm glad at the end of all thingsâ€| my time was spent with youâ€| "

Rose watched Snowdrop walk away from Stoick, her arms around herself, before she sat next to Hiccup again, curling up into a ball as Astrid smiled.

Astrid looked up to her little sister and held out a hand. Snowdrop took it and cried, but Astrid squeezed it.

"No crying," she told Snowdrop. "No cryingâ€| "

"You can't goâ€| "

"Remember what I saidâ€| " Astrid whispered, a tear staining her cheek. "Iâ€| will always be with youâ€| no matter what happensâ€| "

"You say that, but I don't believe you," Snowdrop hiccupped. Astrid sighed, only able to take in another shallow breath.

"Promise meâ€| promise me you'll be a good auntâ€| and take care of Hiccup."

Snowdrop shook her head, squirming as her heart twisted in her little chest. Astrid's heart ached at the sight of Snowdrop trying so hard to be brave and failing.

"Snowâ€|"

"No, you can't leave us!" Snowdrop cried.

Rose swallowed but kept her eyes locked on the Mother dragon. The dragon flicked her eye to Rose, a tiny speck of life remaining. Rose clenched her jaw.

"Just hold my handâ€| it'll be alrightâ€|"

Hiccup sobbed again as Snowdrop wept big fat tears all over herself. Valkyrie didn't stir, sleeping soundly upon Astrid's chest.

She felt herself slipping, and she squeezed her eyes shut, fear slowly filling her. She was fading.

"I love youâ€| bothâ€| so much," she sobbed weakly, tears falling from her eyes. "And I am soâ€| proud of youâ€|"

Hiccup bit his lip, clutching Astrid as she grew cold.

"The Mother is still alive," Rose said suddenly. Everyone turned and looked at her as she stared at Hiccup and his family, her cheeks wet with tears, her hand clutching the knife Valka used to free Valkyrie. Astrid couldn't open her eyes, and her head was growing heavier by the second as Hiccup looked at the knife in Rose's hand.

"Rose?" Valka asked. Rose didn't look at her. Her gaze was fixed upon Hiccup.

"I'm so sorry for not letting you fight for her that night," Rose forced herself to say. Hiccup blinked, not understanding. "I didn't know what was at stake. I didn't know about the baby. I was so focused on bringing us back together that I didn't think about the other people you loved, and for that, I can never make up for what I've done."

Hiccup gave her an angry look, distraught over Astrid in his arms. "Rose, Iâ€| I can talk to you later."

"No, you can't," Rose spat.

Hiccup watched her shake like a leaf in place. But she held her chin up high and took a deep breath.

"I did what I always wanted. I brought the family together, Dagur's dead, the Underground is destroyedâ€| but I didn't think about everything else. I didn't think this would happenâ€|" She painfully looked upon the blood staining the furs under Astrid. "I want to pay penance for everything I've done, now that I've accomplished everything I had set out to do."

Hiccup didn't say anything as Rose looked at the knife in her hand.

"You deserve so much more than this. You deserve the happiness that I have."

She didn't move her head, but she looked at Hiccup.

"Astrid?" Snowdrop asked gently. "Astrid?"

Hiccup's gaze broke from Rose's as he quickly returned to Astrid, her body heavy in his arm, still, no longer shivering. He looked upon her unmoving face, her skin as pale as dry bones, her lips red. Her arm was limp under Valkyrie and her hand lied open, relaxed and lifeless.

"Noâ€|" Hiccup breathed. He gave her a squeeze and gave her head a shake. "No, _NO_!"

Snowdrop burst into tears as Hiccup cried out, frantically trying to get a reaction out of Astrid. The ghost of her smile stained her expression and tears dried on her frigid cheeks.

Rose stepped back slowly, holding the knife. She stiffly turned around and faced Valka and Stoick, who ran to their son as he cried, stepping around Rose. Valka scooped up the baby and Stoick grabbed Hiccup, pulling him back, holding him still as his heart shattered in his chest. Ruffnut and Tuffnut followed them, crying out as Hiccup screamed in agony, losing her all over, his world dark and empty.

No one looked up as Rose walked away, too distracted by Astrid's almost-cold body, and she walked back into the sunshine. She looked up at the sky where a frenzy of mindless, chaotic dragons tore each other apart, screaming and shrieking as the Mother looked up at them, her body letting go as she tried to fight the poison in her blood. Rose stepped over Dagur's corpse, long dead and never-waking, and lifted her hand to the Mother.

A Monstrous Nightmare landed behind her and sniffed Dagur's corpse, at the frozen blood upon the snow. He devoured his body as dragons landed on the Mother's wing, snuffing at the webbing above Hiccup and Astrid. They were after the smell of blood.

Stoick tore Hiccup away from Astrid's body as Snowdrop screamed, the dragons trying to get to them. Hiccup fought against him, trying to reach for Astrid, his voice shrill.

"ASTRID! NO, LET ME GO! I'M NOT LEAVING HER!"

Stoick hauled him back. "Son, we have to move; we can't stay here!"

The Mother looked at Rose, her shallow breaths barely touching her massive lungs, as Rose stared deep into her soul.

"I gave my spirit to the Harbinger," she whispered. "I gave my mind to the Valkyrie and I gave my soul to the Saviourâ€|"

The Monstrous Nightmare swallowed the last of Dagur's body and slowly turned around, growling towards the wing. Tuffnut and Ruffnut grabbed Hiccup and helped push him away as Hiccup tried to fight them, his eyes fixed on Astrid's body in the snow.

"I brought my family back togetherâ€| I did what I had always wantedâ€|" Rose whispered.

They rounded the corner and Valka froze. Valkyrie screamed and burst into tears as Valka held her to her breast, her eyes wide and locked

upon the Nightmare as it stalked her. The dragon twitched his head, licking his lips as smoke smouldered out of his nostrils. The dragon swiped for Valka. She screamed and twisted to the side, running under the Nightmare's wing. She tripped and fell onto her side as the dragon whirled around. Valkyrie wailed even harder, and Hiccup forced himself to turn away, to look for his child as Astrid disappeared around the corner.

"Stoick!" Valka screamed as she pushed herself back with her legs, holding the baby. Hiccup and Stoick, both suddenly distracted by Valka and Valkyrie's screams, cried out and ran for them, seeing the Nightmare in the distance as it chortled, baring its teeth.

"MUM!" Hiccup screamed.

The dragon was in between him and Valka. Valka crawled back on her backside until her back hit the Mother. She huddled as she became cornered, curling herself around Valkyrie, gritting her teeth and squeezing her eyes shut.

"I am the Spirit Weaver," Rose whispered as she brought the knife up.
"I am the Spirit Weaver!"

Hiccup saw in the corner of his eye, the movement of Rose's arm, the glint of the blade as she brought it under her jaw. He snapped his gaze over and reached out.

"ROSE, NO!"

"I am the Spirit Weaver!"

And she slashed the knife across her own throat. The world went silent as Hiccup watched, absolutely horrified and frozen inside. Rose dropped the knife and held her neck, cringing and gasping for air as blood spurted forth, coating the snow, her riding suit, everything. She fell to her knees and reached out her bloody hand, pressing it to the Mother's eye.

There was a flash of white light, erupting from Rose's hand as she pressed her hand against the Mother's endless sight. A hot bolt of power surged through her and her eyes burst into light as the wind howled around her, whipping her short red hair about her face. Her back arched and twisted as a ring of energy exploding out of her, white and fiery. Everyone was thrown back as Rose felt the last aspect of herself slink through her body and into her hand, passing through her fingers.

Flashes of her childhood in darkness passed over her eyes as she felt the last of her spirit shatter! Hiccup waking her in the ocean after she burned with Outcast Island, her eyes open to a beautiful, open sky! The remnants of her soul passing out of her body! Valka and Stoick kissing after fourteen years of separation! Her mind fractured and her eyes rolled to the back of her head, one last memory kissing her farewell:

"I'm sorry. My name is Rose.

Rose's mouth went dry as Hiccup smiled gratefully. She stepped back and looked around timidly. "Rose? What does that mean?"

_ "I'm told it's a lovely flower. Red or white or maybe other colours." Rose smiled softly, her heart racing so fast within her chest, she thought it would break. "And the stem has thorns. But I've never seen one, so I'm not sure if I do the name justice." _

_ "It's nice to meet you, Rose. Who did you come with?" _

_ Rose hesitated before sheepishly looking outward. What was she supposed to say? "I was sent as a representative to one of the clans who couldn't make it." She took a shaky breath and licked her lips, trying to muster her courage. Her bond made her blood hot, and she tried to get the whisperings of other dragons out of her mind. "I have been waiting very long to meet you. You look like him, you know. Your father." _

_ Hiccup hardly heard her, his gaze fixed upon the chest in his hands.

-

_ Hiccup motioned to the box. "So your name. It could be here." _

_ "I certainly hope not," she said very quickly. Hiccup raised an eyebrow. Rose blanched. She spoke too soon. But the thought of her being betrothed to her brother made her skin crawl. _

_ "You're the first one to say that," Hiccup murmured. _

_ Rose bit her lip. "It's justâ€¦ I have someone else. At home. They're waiting for me to come back. I was to come when the marriage was announced and return to them. If it is written, thenâ€¦ that will be an awkward thing to explain." _

_ Especially when the person waiting for me is our mother, she thought. _

_ Hiccup smiled and bowed his head. "Then I hope for your sake that your name isn't on this piece of paper. But I don't understandâ€¦ you sailed here alone?" _

_ "I sailed with trader Johann from my island. It was a long trip but I feel it'll be worth it." _

_ Hiccup nodded. Rose looked at him and smiled again, but she was also wary. She cocked her head to the side and grinned. "Ah. It seems you didn't want to see my name on the scroll either." _

_ Hiccup stared at her through his eyelashes. "What gave it away?" _

_ "I can see you thinking of another face. My mother does it all the time when she thinks of my father. She stares off and you can see his face behind her eyes. You have the same ghost in your face." _

_ Hiccup blinked at little Rose, who looked straight into his eyes. She wanted him to realize, realize without her telling him outright. But he looked away and looked at the box. Rose smiled and rested her hands on the chest. _

_ "Have you read it, yet?" she asked quietly. _

Hiccup looked up, confused. "No."

Rose looked up and beamed. "I can't wait to hear what she says," Rose whispered gently, smiling. Valka had already told her what was upon the scroll, butâ€œ she wanted Hiccup to read it for himself. "I hope she's beautifulâ€œ"

And I hope she makes you happier than I could ever make you.

The light disappeared. The Monstrous Nightmare didn't move, his eyes looking nowhere.

Hiccup opened his eyes slowly, his body curled up against the wing. Everyone stirred slowly, bewildered and shaken. Valka lifted her head timidly, looking up at the Nightmare, who looked at her, both of them confused and still. Hiccup remembered himself and struggled to his feet, grunting and groaning.

"What happened?" Ruffnut asked. Hiccup stumbled across the patch of snow, running around the back of the Nightmare, slipping as he saw Rose's body.

"Rose?" he choked. He ran to her and fell to his knees, grabbing her frail figure and pulling her over. His eyes fell upon the gash across her throat and he made a strangled sound as his jaw dropped, his gut wrenching and nausea sweeping over him. "Oh-oh gods, no, no no no â€œ"

He almost hurled before he pressed his knuckles to his mouth, trembling in horror.

Her eyes were vacant, staring up at the blue sky above. Hiccup couldn't breathe, he couldn't see or feel. He collapsed and crumpled, resting his forehead on hers, too distraught to cry. Stoick ran to Valka, putting himself in front of the Nightmare. But the dragon stepped back, his snout wrinkled and a confused growl sounding from deep in his belly.

I'm sorryâ€œ it had to be this wayâ€œ

Hiccup jumped and opened his eyes, searching Rose's face as her voice whispered in his mind. Her skin became fragile, little pieces of her cheek flaking away. They floated into the sky, dancing in the air like rose petals.

I hopeâ€œ you can forgive me for what I've doneâ€œ

Hiccup stared up in awe as white petals fluttered from Rose's body, filling the sky with beautiful dancers. His eyes filled with tears as a petal kissed his nose before flying away, drifting off and twirling in the air slowly, like a butterfly. Stoick looked up, watching the petals sprinkle down like feathers, landing on Valka's hair.

The battle on board the ships stopped as everyone craned their heads, watching as the white petals dotted the ships. So beautiful, so peaceful and pure, so innocent it made all malicious men think of homeâ€œ think of their familiesâ€œ

Snowdrop reached up with a tiny hand as a petal fell into her palm. She had never seen anything like this beforeâ€œ it was so soft and

light and gentle.

Take care of our family for meâ€|_

Rose petals flew under the wing, dancing in the air before they gently fell upon Astrid's body, resting on the cold skin of her arms and face.

Tell them that I felt no painâ€| tell them that I wanted thisâ€_|_

The last of Rose's body disappeared, white fragments of her being falling through Hiccup's fingers into the red soil. Hiccup stared at them, tears swimming in his eyes, as he stared at the dancing petals as they sighed and whispered against his skin.

You've shown me what impossible looks likeâ€| and it is beautiful and daunting and endlessâ€_|_

Hiccup looked upon the Mother in front of him, his shoulders sinking as exhaustion overtook him. His wifeâ€_| his sisterâ€_| even Dagur's death plagued his mind like dark shadows, like a nightmare he would think of at a random time. Like a heavy blanket in the sun. Suffocating.

A sharp pain hit his broken arm, and he gasped. Crumpling inward, crushing the petals in his hand, fire surged up his arm and into his heart.

I may not have been the best sisterâ€| but you were a good brother. A great one. And if you never forgive me again, thenâ€_| I understand. But I hope this final giftâ€_| I hope it brings you a lifetime of adventure. A lifetime of love. A lifetime of happiness._

Hiccup's arm snapped into place and he cried out as the bones fused together as his blood boiled in his skin. His body filled once more with heat and he gasped for a breath as he felt Rose fade from his mind. He squeezed his hand closed and curled his arm up, marvelling as it bent without pain.

Goodbye, Hiccupâ€| I love youâ€_| and thank youâ€_| for bringing feeling back to my scarred skinâ€_| and love back to my heartâ€_|_

Rose hushed and Hiccup sat in silence. He didn't move. He couldn't feel anything. Nothing but shockâ€_| and confusionâ€_| and anxiety, his heart fluttering like it had when he first told Astrid he loved her.

The Mother's eye peeled open slowly, revealing a gorgeous, endless eye that seemed to see past dimension, past hatred and death. She gazed upon Hiccup.

Spirit Weaverâ€| _the Mother whispered gently. _The Spirit Weaverâ€_|_

"She did it," Hiccup choked while a tear spilled down his nose and dripped into the earth. "She-she actually did itâ€_| sheâ€_|"

The Mother slowly closed her mouth as the pink foam dissolved, the

wounds in her mouth healing over. The earth rumbled as the Mother lifted her head off the ground, and everyone stared in wonder as she raised her crown into the empty sky. The sun glinted off her precious skin, and the dragons all stopped fighting, hovering as they all stared at her, their minds returning to them.

"She reversed itâ€| she â€" she bonded you."

Hiccup's mouth broke into a small smile, an exasperated laugh flying out of his lungs, almost on the verge of sobbing yet again.

Toothless froze in the snow. He blinked and shook his head. He looked behind himself for a moment, looking up at the Mother as she opened her mouth, roaring into the winter air, creating a huge puff of steam. He felt like time had passed, like he had a nap without meaning to.

Hiccup staggered to his feet and looked for his mother. Stoick had helped her to her feet and Valkyrie wriggled her arms about as a petal fell against her mouth. Valka plucked the remnant off her face and stared at it. She furrowed her brow. She locked eyes with Hiccup and Hiccup pursed his lips. She looked up at the Mother, the colour draining out of her face. Hiccup lunged forward as Valka's legs gave out, a cry stuck in her throat. Stoick caught her as Valka pressed a fist to her own mouth.

"N-No, Rose, no!"

She knew. In her heart, she knew. A rose petal fell and brushed Valka's cheek, kissing her softly. Hiccup wrapped his arms around Valka's body from behind, holding her upright, supporting the baby as Valka broke into silent, heart-wrenching tears. Stoick held her and rocked her back and forth as she held the little piece she had left of her daughter against her heart, muffled cries breaking Hiccup's heart.

"She felt nothing, she felt nothing." Hiccup cried, burying his face into Valka's back. "Sheâ€| just vanishedâ€|"

"But why?" Valka whispered painfully. "Why?"

"She saved usâ€|" he replied. "Look, mum. The dragons."

Valka raised her head and tears spilled over her hot cheeks as the dragons all hovered, looking to the Mother as she bowed her head to Hiccup.

The Spirit Weaverâ€|

Valka and Stoick both looked up, their eyes wide and unbelieving as the Mother connected with them softly.

I used to be the messengerâ€| between man and the gods,_ she said to Valka and Stoick. Hiccup looked up at her in awe. To speak to you is an honourâ€| I will never be able to repay you for the acts of your children. Of your granddaughter. _

Valka's jaw quivered. "Where is my Rose?" she asked in a small voice.

_She hasâ€œ transcended this worldâ€œ _

Valka closed her eyes and bowed her head in grief. The Mother looked upon her head as quiet sobs rocked through her, and Stoick's eyes filled with tears.

I know what it feels to grieve, Mother and Father of Spirit Weaverâ€œ I have felt it, and I still feel it to this day, ever since I lost my soul mate. I know my words may not console you, and I am not trying to do that. But I must thank you, and pay my respects to youâ€œ for Rose's sacrifice ultimately saved my entire world. My children did not call her Spirit Weaver by chance. They knew the heart and knowledge and courage she possessed.

Hiccup swallowed painfully and he felt his heart ache within his chest.

_Rose's mind was filled with thoughts of her family before she died. And I know you may feel anger towards her for what she didâ€œ but if she didn'tâ€œ thousands of lives â€" dragon and man â€" would have perished. She gave my children their will back. She gave them their freedomâ€œ and no god would have ever done the same. _

The Mother bowed her head again and Valka lifted her chin, summing her strength for her daughter, even though her heart broke within her.

"Thank you," she softly replied, sucking in a breath.

HICCUP!

Hiccup whirled around, his eyes falling upon Toothless as he bounded towards him in the snow. The Night Fury crashed into Hiccup's body, rolling the pair of them as thousands of words passed through Hiccup's mind in an instant. Everyone smiled and their eyes and noses stung as Toothless rubbed his face on Hiccup's chest. Coos, croaks, and chortles all reverberated out of the dragon's throat, glee filling him. Hiccup wrapped his arms around him as Toothless licked his face.

_Oh gods, I am so sorry, I don't know what happened, if I hurt you or â€" _

"You didn't hurt me, bud. I'm so glad you're back."

Dagur?

The Mother growled slightly.

_The Defilerâ€œ is dead, _she told Toothless._ Forever. When his dragon died, his tether was partially fractured. When his body died without the bond at his advantage, the damage was rendered permanent. Dagur will never walk this earth again. _

Hiccup's smile vanished. "Waitâ€œ what?"

When a person travels to Valhalla, they do not come back, Saviour.

Toothless read Hiccup's mind, and sadness overcame him. Noâ€| Astridâ€| she's â€" she's â€"

"Astrid didn't make itâ€| sheâ€| she died after having our babyâ€| " Hiccup murmured, as if he was just realizing it.

Toothless shook his head, his eyes slowly narrowing into slits.

"I tried, bud," Hiccup coughed, his throat constricting.

Saviourâ€| the Mother whispered. _The Harbingerâ€| brought life into this world. A child conceived with bonds in her blood, a powerful creature possessing power that I know not of. That was the Harbinger's purpose. _

"You're wrong," Hiccup said coldly. He stared up at the Mother, and even Toothless shrank as Hiccup challenged the ultimate being above him. "Astrid was more than that. She was strong. A fighter. She never gave up, even when she thought she lost our child, she fought. She never had one purpose â€" she may have been your Harbinger, but she was my wife. She was my everything."

_She was your soul mate. And still is, Saviour. She always will be.

—

Hiccup shook his head and wiped tears from his face. "Then you should know. You should know how I feel."

The Mother was silent for a while. The air was heavy with tension as Hiccup refused to speak. The Mother sighed.

I said Astrid brought life into this world. When Valkyrie was cut from her bodyâ€| do you think their connection was severed, too?

Hiccup looked up, a frown destroying his complexion as another tear fell down his face. "I'm sorry, butâ€| I don't think I can talk anymore."

Dagur has no children. No one to carry on his legacy. No dragon to bind his blood, to save him. No body intact to return to. And when I said the Harbinger had fulfilled her purpose, I did not say her life was forfeitâ€| did I?

Hiccup blinked, a warm feeling tickling his gut. "Well, no, but â€""

Rose didn't sacrifice herself for the dragons, Hiccup, the Mother whispered softly.

"Yes, she did," Hiccup slowly replied. "She-she did to give the dragons their will back, you said â€""

_She sacrificed herself for her family. For you. Because she believed in the impossible, and put her faith into the bonds we have, the bonds we are born withâ€| the bonds we build to bind ourselves to people and places and silly things. She took a chance, hoping the bond Valkyrie and Astrid shared through parenthood would be strong

enough._

The Mother bowed her head again.

_And it's those bonds, Saviour, that keep us all alive, through the harshest storms, and through the coldest blizzardsâ€| through the bloodiest warsâ€| And the bond between Astrid and the child you bore with herâ€| is the strongest bond of all. _

The Mother went silent and Hiccup didn't move for a moment. The words consoled him, only slightly, but something made his heart race within his chest.

"H-Hiccup?" Stoick breathed. "Son?"

"I need a minute, dadâ€|" Hiccup muttered, another tear falling down his face. His father shifted behind him, crunching the snow beneath his boots.

"No, I â€" I just thought â€"" Stoick trailed off, fading as his voice broke.

Hiccup turned slowly, sighing angrily, the Mother's words wearing out of his mind like a dream. He rubbed his eyes and shook his head again.

"Hupâ€|" Snowdrop whispered.

"Please! I-I need a moment, a moment to breathe, a moment to â€""

Hiccup dropped his hands and opened his eyes. And in an instant, his racing heart stopped. His jaw dropped and his eyes filled with tears again as he looked towards the wing. His entire family, his friends, all stared at him in shock as he stared past them. Astrid couldn't move, her face filled with the same shock as Hiccup. Tears welled in her eyes, hanging behind her eyelashes, her feet bare in the snow and her hand holding her belly. She was standing up right, back straight and perfectly aligned, wearing nothing but the wraps around her breasts and her singed trousers. Her jaw quivered as they stared at each other in suspended disbelief, both of their hearts frozen in bewilderment.

Astrid tried to say something, but no words formed. Hiccup took a step, lifted his hand. Tears spilled forth like waterfalls as he took another step. Astrid blinked quickly, pushing the tears out of her eyes and onto her skin.

"Hiccup?" she squeaked. "Something held me back again â€" I â€""

Her voice made her real. Hiccup gasped and took three quick steps before his knees buckled. He fell into the snow, staring up at Astrid as she ran to him. He couldn't believe it, and the feeling of relief was almost more painful than the grief he had felt only moments before. Hiccup wrapped his arms around her as she sank into his lap, sobs hiccupping out of her mouth, her knees around his waist. She cupped his head and howled, a mixture of relief and joy and gratefulness jumping from her throat into the air. They kissed each other and struggled to breathe, crushing each other in their embraces, as rose petals tumbled across the ground around

them.

50. Home

Chapter Fifty: Home

The war was over. Dagur had been slain. The Mother had been revived. The men stopped fighting upon the decks of their ships, too spent to continue, no reason to continue. With help from Alvin, Eret, Cauli, and Netmug, the prisoners were transported out of the bay. Everyone watched the Underground shoulder as the sun set.

"Where will you go?" Hiccup had asked her.

I fear men have not entirely realized the magic of dragons,_ she had replied. I will travel far beyond the adventures of your people, and live in solace with my children once the eggs hatch. It won't be long. They have been ready for quite some timeâ€¦ but after that, we will leave this place. It smells of death and sorrow, no fit place for me._

Fishlegs and a clutch of Berkian riders chose to stay behind to protect the Mother for the three weeks it would take for the eggs to hatch and the babies to learn to fly while the rest sailed for Berk. No one spoke but the matrons as they quietly tended to everyone in need, be it a Berserker or an Outcast or an ally. Even the dragons flew in silence above them, taking their time across the water. Once the smoke of the Underground disappeared behind the horizon, the prisoners began to realize their realityâ€¦ the weighing reality of their freedom, almost unbelievable. Some wandered among the decks, looking for their loved ones. Some were reunited in bouts of jollity. Others were not.

Hiccup didn't fly Toothless home. Rather, they stayed upon an ally trading ship in the cabin. Astrid and Hiccup didn't leave the bed the entire three days of their journey home. He laid in bed, gazing down upon his daughter lovingly. Valkyrie's fingers were wrapped tightly around one of his fingers, and Hiccup smiled and laughed softly as she yawned and shook her other fist about. Astrid slept across from him, her body spent, her face peaceful. Hiccup looked up at her for a moment and leaned over Valkyrie to kiss Astrid's cheek. He rubbed the tip of his nose against her cheekbone before he leaned away, resting his head on his pillow and kissing Valkyrie's head. Toothless slept behind him on the floor, his legs in the air and his tongue hanging out.

The day they finally made it back to Berk was a day of sleeplessness. Hiccup held Valkyrie in his arms as Astrid stood in front of him, her hand holding Snowdrop's. They passed the beacons and Astrid's shoulders shook as she tried to stifle her tears. Home. She was home. The peak the Great Hall was carved into seemed so much taller than she remembered, but the smell and the cold was the same. Suddenly, all the trials and tribulations were worth it. It was worth this moment, seeing Berk tower above her once more.

When the ships had docked, only allies were permitted on Berkian soil. Hiccup opened the offer to Berserkers and Outcasts, promising them shelter if they were willing to help rebuild their houses. Some took up the offer and left their ships, handing in their swords and

crested armour to the forge before they climbed the hill. But there were others who couldn't leave the boats.

Valka stood upon the solid wooden docks as Alvin stayed upon an Outcast ship. The stern and the railing separated them, but Alvin reached down to lightly touch Valka's bandages around her head.

"You can stay," Valka said gently.

Alvin shook his head slowly. "No, love. After what I've done? I was exiled for a reason. Because I love something I can't have. And even if I give you a new name and a new life, you would never be mine! and I don't think I deserve any more of your kindness. I don't even think I deserve to live."

"Where will you go, then?" she asked.

"South, probably. I may try to re-establish some kind of village on the allied islands! a place where my people will be safe. Then I'll go and retire someplace warm, how about that?"

Valka smirked. "Sounds like a nice plan, actually."

They chuckled softly. Valka stepped back, turning slightly, ready to leave. They didn't say anything to each other after that, an awkward finality already drawn between them, separating them for the rest of time as Valka walked away.

The Berkians who stayed behind all poured out of the Great Hall, sprinting over the snowy mud and slipping and tumbling as they raced for their loved ones. The dragons filled and warmed the Hangar as tears and cries of joy echoed throughout the village.

Word spread through the village like wildfire about Valkyrie's existence, and before Astrid even felt the ground beneath her boots, Gobber had shoved through the crowd to get to the Haddock clan with Stormfly practically bowling him over. Astrid gasped and quickly handed Hiccup the baby before she raced over, jumping up and wrapping her arms around the Nadder's neck.

You made it back, Stormfly wept. Astrid nodded and refused to let go as Gobber marched straight to Hiccup.

"You have a lot of explainin' to do, young man!" Gobber fussed, placing his fist on his hip and waving around his paddle hand. He gestured to the baby. "You go ahead and become a father without me?! When were you going to tell me?"

Hiccup twisted his mouth and shrugged his shoulders. "I didn't know!" he replied. "Well, I kinda did, but then we thought we lost her and turns out we didn't, so â€""

"Give her here, hurry up," Gobber muttered, shaking his head about.

"Oh, uh, okay," Hiccup muttered, amused. He stepped between them and Gobber crossed his arms gently. Hiccup rested Valkyrie in his thick arms and Gobber broke into a toothy grin. "Watch her head â€""

"Don't be schoolin' me on babies, Hiccup, I know how to hold 'em â€" I practically raised you with Stoick and Val while they did important chief things, seen more of your bottom than you know!"

Hiccup snorted loudly, embarrassed, as Gobber rocked Valkyrie back and forth, singing an off-tune lullaby. "Well, aren't you a sight?" he asked lovingly.

They walked up the hill slowly, greeting the happy villagers with smiles and nods. Astrid was home, and an heir to Berk had been born. There was no end to the celebration. Weeks of feasts as the village was finally rebuilt â€" houses and cabins were slowly raised into the sky as the houses in the trees were stripped for supplies. There was no shortage of hands to help them as Berk was slowly restored. Happiness infected everyone, even those who had suffered for many years.

Eret had no ship to return to the sea with. Hiccup had promised him a new ship for him to sail if he wanted to. Eret accepted the offer gratefully, but something kept him tethered to the docks.

"Do you thinkâ€| now that Dagur's dead, you'll stop trapping?" Ruffnut asked him, awkwardly shifting.

"After what I've seen, there's not much room left for trappers," he replied. He gazed upon Ruffnut's face, smiling a half-smile as he trailed his eyes over her bruised features. Her eye was almost swollen shut, a gash through her eyebrow sewn. He lifted a hand cautiously and hovered the tip of his finger over her purple cheekbone. Ruffnut flinched, only slightly, but she remained still as Eret touched her, the tiniest of contact, before he grinned.

"It's nice to be free now, isn't it?"

Ruffnut sighed shakily. "I still haveâ€| a really hard time. Thoughts in my head keep repeating themselves. Butâ€| it's easier to sleep knowing he can't hurt me or my friends anymore."

Eret smiled down at her. "It's a step."

But, of course, there were people who never came back. Stargazer remained in Astrid's thoughts every day, especially when she fed Valkyrie. As she rocked back and forth with Valkyrie at her breast, she pondered and remembered her mother's voice. Her father in the dreamland.

There were days when Snowdrop would remain quiet, thinking about the day Astrid had broken her back and how awful it made her feel. Ruffnut thought about trader Johann the night he was claimed by the sea.

There wasn't a day that passed where Valka wouldn't cry for Rose. Once Hiccup and Astrid had a home built for them, upon the same foundations from before, Valka realized she had nothing of Rose's. Nothing but a handful of rose petals that she kept in a jar by her bed. She planted one in the garden outside her son's house, hoping the everlasting life of the petal would sprout roots.

And Hiccupâ€| of all things, could never forget Dagur. The way he never stopped killing, how determined he was to end his life. The

memory of his fiery hands around his throat, the way his insides pulled free with the sword. The bond in the body of one so evil. But then he would think of his sister. Rose was the exact opposite of Dagur. She had the bond and used it for good, used it to give people happiness, even if it meant sacrificing herself. There were moments where Hiccup thought about their fights in the past, and how if he could go back, would change those times to be better â€“ full of stories instead of yelling and love instead of resentment.

They changed Valkyrie's name the night of the memorial. It wasn't much to the untrained ear, but Valkyrie-Rose was writ as her full first name. Valkyrie-Rose Stargazer Haddock. A strange name when said aloud, but a beautiful name to Hiccup and Astrid. A name full of meaning and memory â€“ and even though those memories weren't completely cheerful, they wouldn't have the name any other way.

When the sun set on a clear night, the village lined up on the cliffs, staring over the water as the first moon since the Battle of the Underground rose over the waves. Astrid held Valkyrie to her breast as everyone took a moment of silence. With no bodies of the loved ones lost, they lit the beacons instead, and the orange light danced in the distance as tears covered the faces of all, reflecting the soft firelight in their eyes and upon their cheeks.

The Saviour was no longer needed. The Harbinger had fulfilled her duty. The Valkyrie had chosen the fate of herself and her mother. And the Spirit Weaver wove Hiccup and his family a blanket of peace that they would carry on as long as they could.

Astrid reached over and slipped her fingers between Hiccup's. Despite everythingâ€¦ they were together. After a terrifying night in the cove six years ago, to an ordeal of an engagement, to an adventure of a wedding dayâ€¦ after separation and despair, dreamlands and shadows, bonds and broken bonesâ€¦ they remained. They had been reunited at last, and nothing â€“ and no one â€“ would ever take that away from them.

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><p>Five Years Later

It had taken an entire two years to restore Berk to her former glory. Rebuilding the infrastructure and expanding Berk's housing had been the top priority, and restabilising trade routes throughout the north followed closely. Treaties with the allies who had joined Hiccup in battle were writ, and the wild dragons were set free â€“ if they wanted to return to the wilds, that is. Peace â€“ genuine peace â€“ graced Berk's frosty shores and filled her skies with safety and life.

Five years after the Battle of the Underground, wounds had healed and the bloodshed was but a distant memory. Eret's ship had been rebuilt, but he also built himself and his men houses by the docks, as fishermen for Berk, welcome to come and go when they please. Ruffnut's body had returned to normal, and although flashbacks of a dark, cold time came back to her now and again, her trust had healed. And even though Dagur ruined her chances for a valid Berkian marriage, it didn't prevent her from feeling love in her heart. Often times, Tuffnut would catch her staring over towards the bay, where the fish were trying to swim up the river, where the men had cast

their nets, and he would snort and shake his head.

The Dragonlings were brought back, and a surge in births tore through Berk nine or ten moons after the Battle. The riders, now fully grown up with families of their own, taught them every day with assistance from Snowdrop, who, after her tenth birthday, had flourished into an adventurous soul with a fiery heart, like her sister, and finally became eligible to ride a dragon — not that her age stopped her before. It was harder to keep her off Breakfast than it was to get her to read her books.

Events and ceremonies and dragon racing and feasts took over the war halls and the arena, and even the tattered remainders of the foundations left behind from the Battle of Berk had grown over with moss. The burnt trees healed and sprouted new needles, and a hatchery was built off the Hangar, where Valka spent most of her time, only with a new mindset.

But tonight, the air was still. Dragons had grounded and refused to fly and the people stood in the frigid air with furs wrapped about them as they huddled outside the Haddock house. And within, they heard screaming.

No one was worried. They were alive with excitement, for another Haddock child was about to be born.

Astrid gasped a breath as Hiccup held her up, her legs bent and her body squatting in the corner of their bedroom over a birthing stool. Valka and Juniper held both her knees, squeezing them as Astrid gasped for another breath. Her huge, round belly relaxed for a brief moment as a contraction passed.

"You're doing great, Astrid, just a few more pushes!" Juniper cried through a large smile, pushing Astrid's nightgown up over her large belly.

Astrid hissed in and out through her teeth as Snowdrop patted a dry cloth over Astrid's sweaty brows. Hiccup held her tightly, his heart racing, as Astrid's head fell back onto Hiccup's shoulder.

"Hiccup," she wheezed.

"I'm here, you're doing great," Hiccup replied, kissing her wet cheek.

"Could we cut it out, like we did with Val?" Valka asked Juniper.
"She'd just heal."

"No!" Astrid gasped. "No, I can do this —"

Another contraction choked her words, and she squeezed Hiccup's hand so hard she thought it would break. Valka and Juniper grabbed her legs, Juniper watching vigilantly. Snowdrop didn't dare take her eyes off Astrid, her world full of wonder as she looked over Juniper's shoulder.

"Come on, dear, give us a big push!" Juniper cried.

Astrid lifted her head and curled it down, pushing her chin into her chest and bearing down. Her face was beet-red, her skin hot, and she

pushed and pushed, her body taking over, tearing apart, stretching, pain worse than anything she had ever imagined.

"I hate you!" she screamed to Hiccup, still pushing. "I hate you I hate you oh gods!"

Hiccup smiled and stifled a laugh as Astrid gasped for another breath.

"We can see the head, just a few more pushes and you'll be done!" Valka said, smiling so hard her face hurt.

"I can fetch a looking glass, if you want to see â€""

"FUCK YOU, NO I DON'T!" Astrid shrieked. Juniper blinked and scoffed, taken aback, but not surprised at the outburst. Snowdrop giggled. Astrid squeezed Hiccup's hands again. "Don't let me go â€""

"I'm right here, I wouldn't miss this for anything," Hiccup replied quickly, his voice shaking.

"Oh â€" oh gods â€""

Astrid pushed again, another contraction already taking over. And she pushed and pushed as Juniper reached down, and Valka's face lit up like a beacon.

"The head is out, keep going!"

Astrid bore down and screamed, rocking the entire village as she pushed with all her might.

"Reach down, love, reach down!"

Astrid's eyes snapped open, her scream turning into shouts of bewilderment as she felt everything inside her fall from her all at once. She stared down as her body kept pushing, gritting her teeth as she saw her second child. She reached down and grabbed it as its shoulders emerged and pulled it forth. Astrid burst into tears as she pulled her baby against her chest, leaning back in exhaustion, as the baby twitched its fists about.

The villagers outside the house rejoiced as Stoick opened the door to announce the news, and Hiccup's eyes welled with tears as the baby rested against Astrid's chest. Snowdrop held her hands over her mouth, overcome with happiness as Astrid smiled.

"It's a little boy," Valka noted proudly. "A beautiful baby boy."

"Why isn't he crying?" Astrid asked nervously.

"He doesn't need to," Juniper murmured. "He's sleeping, he can breathe. He's safe."

Astrid sighed and gasped as the pain throbbed throughout her body, but none of that mattered. She cried as Hiccup wrapped his arms around her, holding their son together.

When they were finally able to move Astrid back into their bed after

the afterbirth was born with no complications whatsoever, their son latched to her breast and she stared at him with tired eyes. Falling in love, creating a bond between mother and child all over as the sun rose over the ocean.

The door opened softly and Hiccup was there, holding Valkyrie's hand. Her long brown hair tumbled behind her back, braided messily and intertwined with dried flowers she had found the day before. Her green eyes were wide with wonder as she looked up at the bundle in her mother's arms. She dragged Hiccup across the room and clambered into the bed. She peered down at the boy as Hiccup sat next to her.

"I knew it would be a boy," she grinned. "I had a dreamâ€| what's his name?"

Astrid smiled. "The dragons call him the Phoenix," she said quietly. "I don't know what that meansâ€|"

"It's a birdy," Valkyrie-Rose replied. "It's a birdy that lives for a really long time, but never dies. When it gets old, it become fire, and then it is reborn from its own ashes."

Astrid and Hiccup both looked at their daughter as she touched the baby.

"The dragons picked it because he means peace. Peace has been reborn, and it is quiet. And after the battle, he arose from the ashes of our family, and lives again."

Hiccup wrapped an arm around Valkyrie and gave her arm a squeeze. "Did the dragons tell you that?"

"Oh, yes," Valkyrie said with another smile. "They tell me many things, daddy."

"You'll have to share your secrets with us sometime," Hiccup chuckled as he kissed the top of Valkyrie's head. Valkyrie looked up at her mother, who looked down at her son, calm.

"Who's Mikhael, mama?"

Astrid looked up, an eyebrow raised as Valkyrie stared at her.

"Have you been listening to my thoughts again, my dreamer?" she asked.

"Yes," Valkyrie replied innocently. "I feel like I know that name. I just wanted to know who it was."

Astrid licked her lips and sighed, looking out the window. "Heâ€| was a friend, back when we were in the Underground. He diedâ€| he gave the Defiler all of himself and was lost."

Valkyrie nodded slowly, furrowing her brown eyebrows, lips puckered. "He had a scar on his face. I remember now. He helped us."

"He did," Hiccup interjected.

"He said he had a family," Astrid sighed. "But he died and I have no

idea where they are or who they areâ€œ I just remembered the scar. And the phoenixâ€œ Phoenix Mikhael Haddock. I'd like to call him that."

Hiccup smiled and kissed Astrid again, and Valkyrie giggled under her hand.

And outside their window, where Valka had planted the rose petal years beforehand, a stem sprouted from the cold earth, white petals blooming under the morning sun, a single white rose opening itself to the sky as Berk began another day.

**The End*_

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><p>Author's Note

The story is over. I can hardly believe it, as I finish writing this little note. Fifty chapters. Almost four-hundred pages. Almost 200,000 words (that's longer than Goblet of Fire!). Four keyboards. Over a year of writing. _

And now that it's done, I am overwhelmed with emotions. To those who reviewed from day one (or read in silence), I thank you with every inch of my soul and spirit. These past few weeks, I have done nothing but write, determined to bring everyone a new chapter almost every day. And the reviews I received from old-timers and new-comers kept me going. I wrote one-hundred pages in a single week to bring this tale to a rest, and it would be ludicrous to say it wasn't because of people like all of you reviewers, followers, favouriters, and lurkers. I felt welcome to share this story with you._

My only hope, now that the story is done, is that you continue to draw inspiration from my words. If reading Reunion makes you want to write, please write. If it makes you want to draw, please draw. If it makes you want to reach out to me, send me a message. Also, if anyone wants me to read their story or want advice on writing, send me a message. I'd be more than happy to help, and I would like to become more involved in the FF community. Someone has already made a HTTYD music video as a dedication to some HTTYD FF writers. If you look up 'viciouslycans' on YouTube, you'll find it. :)_

Now that our adventure is over, what would you like me to do next? Please tell me, so I can brainstorm over the next wee while and get back to writing. _

Because I've spent a portion of my life devoted to this, I'd like to thank my little sister, who reads all my chapters (and punches me for you all), and gave me in the inspiration for our Snowdrop; and my mother, who taught me that a pen is a powerful tool._

End
file.